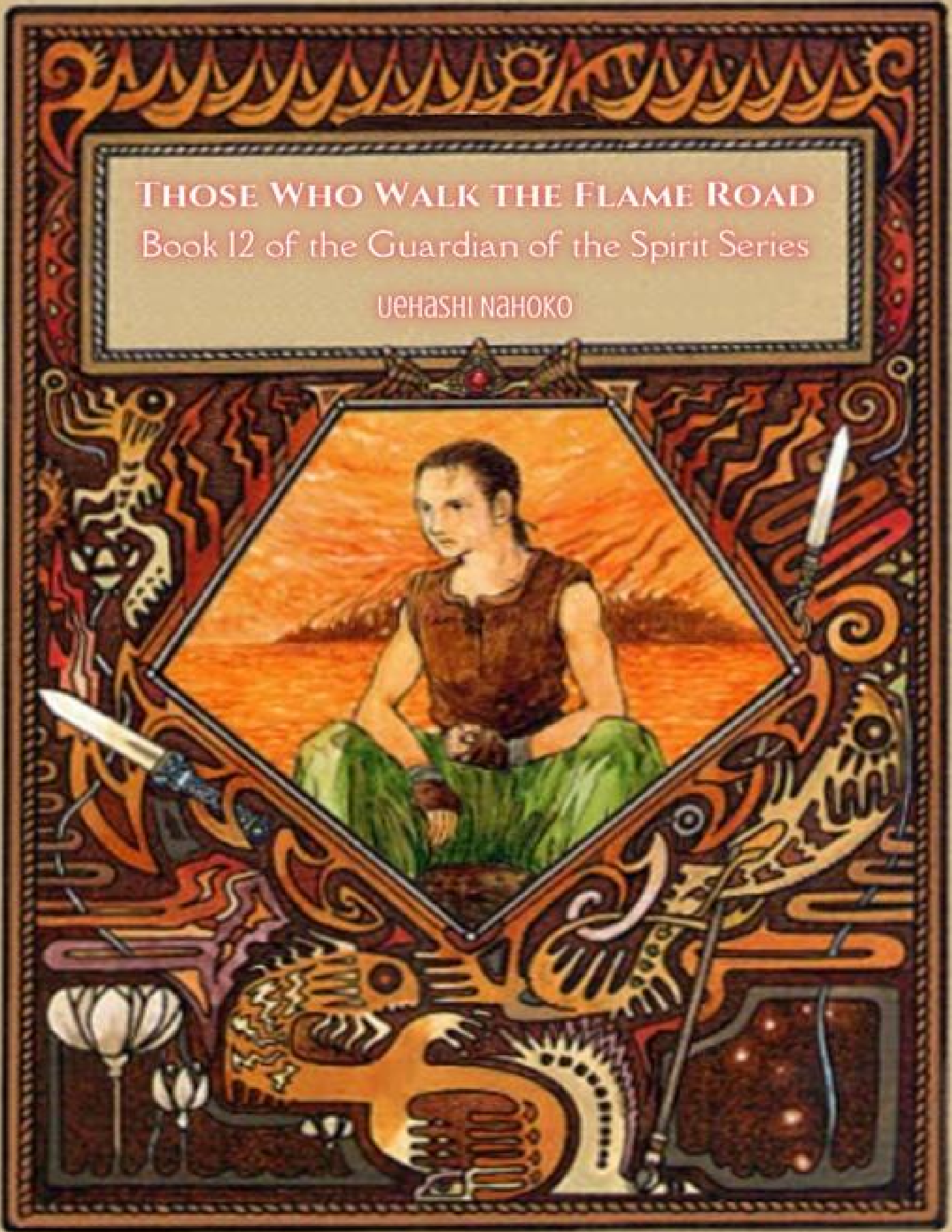


THOSE WHO WALK THE FLAME ROAD
Book 12 of the Guardian of the Spirit Series

UEHASHI NAHOKO





Those Who Walk the Flame Road

Book 12 of the

Guardian of the Spirit

Series

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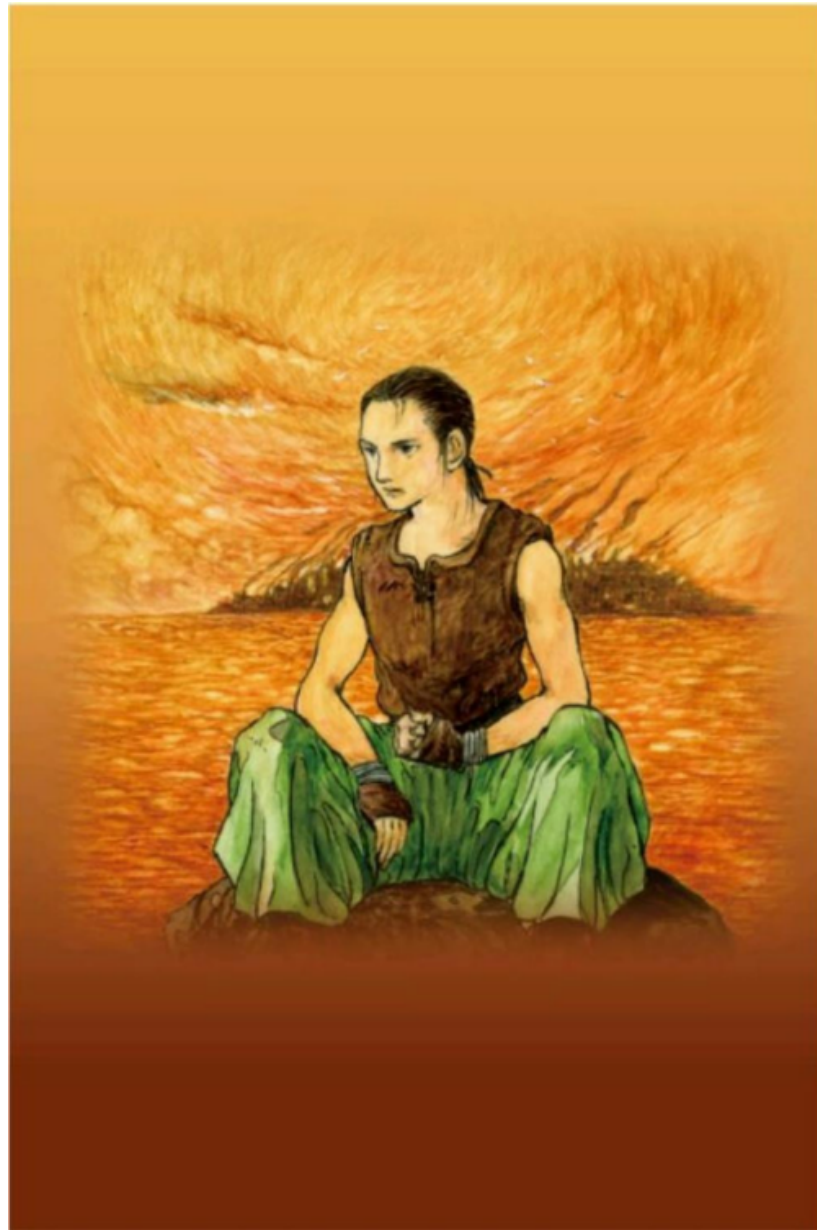
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prologue
the cry of the hawk

Stars gleamed like silver sand in the jet-black sky. Hugo was walking along the shore on the way back to his ship. He heard the waves coming in and the wood creaking on decks and rigging as he approached.

He climbed up on deck and took a look around. He heard footsteps on the deck behind him, but he didn't turn. A scrap of paper in his left hand fluttered in the sea breeze.

"I wonder how long this feeling will last." He turned around slowly. Sodok, a magic weaver, was behind him. Sodok was past middle age, short, and slightly built. He looked annoyed, but there was also a certain fondness and consideration in his eyes, buried perhaps, but still there.

Hugo grinned. "I never tire of hearing the tide coming in. The waves soothe something in me. Everything that's bothering me seems to get farther and farther away. It all feels insignificant, looking out at the ocean."

Sodok sighed.

Hugo showed the scrap of paper in his hand to Sodok. "Have you heard the news? It has to do with the Southern Army's spies."

Those spies had the same rank as Hugo. They were Taku, which meant "hawk" in the Talsh language. There had been two messages from the southern continent in recent days, and one of those letters included an encrypted letter. This letter was probably written by one of Hugo's allies in the Southern Army, which was led by Prince Hazar. Hugo served in the Northern Army under Prince Raul, but there were always a few people willing to switch allegiances if the pay or the ideology was right.

The letter was from an old man with a breezy attitude and the light of laughter in his eyes. Hugo remembered him now, lips twitching upwards in a faint smile. "The letter's from an old friend. I've known him even longer than you."

Sodok's eyebrows drew together. "So it's from one of your friends in the Southern Army before your defection, then?"

Hugo's smile deepened, but he didn't answer Sodok's question one way or the other. He put his back to the harbor and fixed his eyes on the sail fluttering in the clear air. "Go to sleep, Sodok. I want to listen to the waves for a little longer."

Sodok shrugged. "Fine, I'll sleep. You don't need to tell me twice. But you should sleep soon, too. We want to leave early to take advantage of the wind. We should get to where we're headed in two or three days."

Hugo waved Sodok off with an impatient gesture.

Sodok grumbled, then made his way belowdecks.

Hugo was left alone on the deck. There were no other people around, and only the sea remained with him, vast and spread out to the horizon line. Darkness fell, overwhelming and oppressive. Hugo narrowed his eyes and looked out at the ocean, smoking a pipe of choru. The aged infiltrator of the Southern Army had written about General Hamil's movements through the countryside, but the last thing he'd written had nothing to do with the war at all.

*There are still birds nesting on the roof of that house along the canal.
Do you remember it?*

Hugo did. Reading the words recalled to him the smell drifting off that canal, riding the wind just like the white-feathered birds that tended to flock there. Those birds crowded around people so thickly that there seemed to be no way out. Hugo remembered seeing people like that, and being surrounded himself. He felt like he could sense the presence of those birds and people on the deck, though they were all far from here.

I guess he went back to that house recently.

Hugo hadn't been back there in so many years. It was part of his distant past. Hugo wondered why the infiltrator had decided to include those lines as part of his message, and guessed that the infiltrator had been forced to make some kind of choice. Or maybe it was his way of saying farewell.

"Never hesitate. You're steering the ship, and you want others to follow you. They won't do that if you're weak-willed."

It was like Hugo could hear his voice again, across the distance of time.

Hugo was still smiling, but there was something painful in his expression now. The infiltrator had set Hugo on his life's path. The only reason he was here now was because of that man. At the time, Hugo hadn't realized how terrifying his life would be, and how many close calls he would have. When he thought about it, he felt a strange warmth in his chest that was difficult to identify. Was it pride? Or remembered fear? A bit of both?

Hugo closed his eyes and let the memories wash over him like a crashing wave. He extended his hands to the white birds as they flew

away from him, onto the crude roof of the house near the canal where he'd spent part of his childhood...

part one

the broken shield



chapter one

engulfed in flames



At the end of winter on the southern continent, an ancient nation with a proud history was destroyed by the invading Talsh Empire. The name of this ancient nation was Yogo. The people who lived there believed in a god called Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens. Their leader was said to be descended from the god.

"The Talsh army is coming!"

Hugo awoke to screams and warning shouts coming from outside the house.

"Hugo!" Hugo's little sister, Nahso, was sleeping beside him. He turned toward her, wrapping his arms around her when he felt her hands move around the nape of his neck.

"Mom?" Hugo picked up Nahso and started looking for their mother. She was awake in the next room, packing their belongings into bags that lay scattered on her bed. Her face was half-illuminated by the fires outside the window, and half in shadow.

They were staying in an old warehouse in Yogo's capital, Hoshiro, in the lower city. The warehouse was built right against the bank of a large, deep canal. Hugo and his family had been there for about three days, staying hidden from prying eyes. It was widely believed that the capital would stand the longest against the invading Talsh army, but now, they had nowhere else to run.

Hugo didn't know this, but all over the city, the Mikado's Shields, their families, and the armies that followed them were locked in fierce combat with the Talsh in secret bases of their own. The Mikado's Shields protected the ruler of Yogo from danger with their very lives, and were Yogo's most skilled and experienced warriors. Several of them remained with the Mikado, defending him within the Imperial Palace. They would stay with him until the bitter end. Others protected the city around the palace, hoping to beat the Talsh back before they reached the Mikado, but they were unsuccessful.

The Talsh only killed those who resisted. Ordinary people who didn't take up arms weren't attacked. But the Mikado's Shields had sworn an oath to defend the Mikado and the nation from the enemy. If they could save the Mikado's life, it was possible that the country could one day shake off its oppressors and regain its lost glory.

The Talsh Empire understood Yogo's culture, and was determined to hunt down and kill every Mikado's Shield and every member of their bloodline. The Mikado or part of his family might be spared so that they might serve as puppet rulers, but the warriors who defended the Mikado, and their families, would be killed to a man.

Of course, the Mikado's Shields didn't want to endanger their families in this way. That was why they'd scattered to ten or so hidden

safe houses throughout the city. They were trying to make themselves as diffuse a target as possible. If they were defeated, there would be no one left to protect the Mikado from his enemies.

Hugo's family had fled from their home in the dead of night. Hugo's father caught his shoulder and said, "Protect your mother and sister." He spoke quietly, but his voice was full of emotion. Later in life, Hugo believed that this was the moment that his father had decided to sacrifice himself for the sake of his family.

The sky was red with the light of reflected fire. The gates through the outer walls that protected the capital were all ablaze. Flames danced in the air above Hugo's head. The rhythmic beating of drums in the distance shook the earth. The Talsh army surrounded the city on all sides, striking their enormous war drums in perfect time to the soldiers' marching.

Hugo's ears adjusted to the constant sound of the drums. He started to hear other things: screams, shouts, and a high-pitched call like a flute. Hugo had never heard an instrument like that before. Thereafter, he associated that sound with the ultimate destruction of the Yogo Empire.

"Hugo, don't cry," his father said. "This is what the Mikado's Shields have commanded. We live to fight for the Mikado and our nation." His polished armor shone in the bright light of the fires of war. He was a commander in Yogo's army, and his accomplishments as a warrior meant that he, too, was one of the Mikado's shields.

Until now, Hugo hadn't truly understood what being a Mikado's Shield meant. He was proud of his father, and he wanted to grow up to

be equal to him. His father's armor was pure and clean, shining white in the firelight. He didn't think the Talsh would even be able to touch him. He was blessed by Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens, and Ten no Kami would never permit the Talsh to befoul Yogo's purity.

We're waiting for a miracle. Ten no Kami will save us.

Hugo's beliefs were sincere. He'd been told that loyalty and faith would be rewarded for his entire life. His father was risking his life to protect the Mikado, who was the descendant of Ten No Kami. He didn't think the god would abandon them in their hour of need.

"When you grow up," his father said, "be a warrior. One that Ten no Kami would be proud to protect." He smiled.

That was the last time Hugo ever saw his father's face.



"Mom! Get behind me!" There was a short sword on the floor near his mother's bed. He picked it up and attached it to the belt at his waist. The fighting was fierce in the city, and they were watching and waiting for a good opportunity to sneak out the back door into the canal. They might be able to steal a boat and get to safety if no one noticed them escaping.

But when Hugo and his family tried to sneak out the back, they found soldiers already there. Hugo's mother took Nahso's little hand in hers. Hugo was out front, and he stopped running when he heard the

footsteps of the approaching soldiers. "We can't go this way," he whispered.

The canal wouldn't save them. They couldn't get out of the city that way. The Talsh had cut off every route that the people inside the city might use to flee. The army started occupying the buildings near the canal and other waterways first. Securing a water supply was important, and they knew that the city's people would try to use boats to escape the battle. That was just common sense.

Many of the soldiers protecting the city were raw recruits that looked like they would blow over in a stiff wind. They were terrified of the invaders. Some of them hadn't even come of age yet. The cleverer young soldiers stole boats and managed to get away before the Talsh marched into the city, but there weren't enough boats for everyone to leave that way. Those who managed to get away before the battle began in earnest were the fortunate ones. For the people trapped in the buildings along the invasion route, the city walls crumbled before their eyes, replaced by a sheet of fire.

It was hell.

Hugo's grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles had discussed their evacuation plans before the Talsh army's arrival, but Hugo didn't know where all of them were—and none of them were evacuating to the same location. He couldn't just pick a city to run to when there was no guarantee of finding help there. And even if he knew where to go, how could they get past the entire Talsh army?

Hugo was the son of a warrior. He was fully prepared to die in the battle himself, but he wanted his mother and younger sister to live. And

he didn't want to entrust their lives to anyone else. He huddled down in a corner of the warehouse, keeping hidden with his family and trying desperately to come up with a new plan.

Eventually, he stood up again.

"Hugo? Where are you going?" his mother whispered. She was agitated—almost crying—but she was trying to keep calm for her children's sake.

"We need to get to the second floor," Hugo whispered back.

"We can't get out of here from there," his mother said.

"That's why the Talsh won't search it thoroughly. They'll think that no one would try to hide there. I have an idea, but we need to hurry."

Hugo's mother picked up Nahso. Hugo took his mother's hand and led her along the dark corridor in the direction of the staircase. She seemed reluctant to move from their hiding place, but she did follow him and didn't let go of his hand as they ran.

Windows flashed by. Women and children were pouring into the streets. Hugo crouched down a little as he started rushing up the stairs. His mother and sister were fast on his heels.

From the second floor, Hugo caught sight of a few young men fighting at the door of the warehouse. They were clearly outnumbered. Their screams echoed in the air, and under them, there was still that steady and terrible rhythm of the war drums. The Talsh army was so close and marching in such numbers that their footfalls were like stones striking the earth from a great height. The army was an unnatural landslide, sweeping over the city in a destructive wave.

It was a little quieter on the second floor of the building. The windows were covered with wool and oiled paper. Cold wind blew in through the gaps at the windowpanes. Hugo smelled oil and sheepskin.

Hugo put a finger to his lips. "Walk quietly. We don't want them to hear us downstairs."

There was a storage room on this floor where wool and paper were kept. Hugo followed his nose, leading his mother and sister toward the storage room.

"We're getting farther away from the canal," Hugo's mother said, but she didn't press the issue. She'd seen that the back way was blocked. They couldn't leave this warehouse anytime soon without being spotted. A woman outside cried out sharply, then went silent. Hugo's mother went pale. There were more women's screams coming from below.

"That's... Samura and Tora. We have to save them." She was shaking. Samura and Tora were old friends.

Hugo gritted his teeth, then shook his head in refusal. They weren't safe themselves; they couldn't save anyone else.

Hugo's mother seized his elbow, pulling him closer. She cupped his face in her hand, looking down at him with a strange expression. Hugo turned away and started moving again, but his mother stayed completely still. Hugo looked back at her and gestured for her to follow. She didn't.

"We can't just leave them all to die," she said. "Is that something that one of the Mikado's Shields would do?"

Hugo shook his head again. "I won't desert them. I'll get you and Nahso to safety, then come back for them. I promise."

His mother frowned. "If there's a way for Nahso and I to escape, we should show everyone the way."

Hugo was both terrified and impatient. "Even if we could help them, the kids won't stay quiet enough for us to hide. I promised dad that I would protect you both, and that's what I'm going to do." They didn't have time for this. Hugo briefly forgot to keep quiet and said, "Please understand, mom! I can't break my promise! And if we stay here much longer, we'll be discovered!"

There were more screams coming from downstairs.

Nahso started shaking. "That was Anya..." She twisted out of her mother's hold and landed with a little leap, then took off running. Hugo tried to catch her before she ran off, but her tiny hand slipped through his fingers.

"Don't be stupid," Hugo hissed, keeping his voice down. "Get back here."

Hugo and his mother chased after his sister.

"Don't go down there!" Hugo said. "You can look, but don't go!"

Nahso was as light-footed as a mouse as she sprinted down the hallway back to the stairs. She wasn't listening. When she got to the staircase, she ran down it.

Hugo quickened his pace. Before he was halfway down the staircase, he smelled smoke. He looked up and discovered that the roof of the building was on fire. He found out later that the Talsh used fire arrows

to destroy buildings in cities that resisted their rule. The storage areas of the warehouse were full of wool, and they went up in flames in a flash.

Hugo froze. This was a nightmare.

If his mother had only listened to him and followed him, they might have been able to jump down into a wagon from the second floor. They might be away from this place already. Why didn't she trust him? There were no Talsh soldiers swarming the back roads yet; they were still securing the main thoroughfare. It might have been possible for them to escape.

Hugo's mother ran out in front of him. They were still chasing Nahso. Talsh soldiers poured through the back entrance and caught sight of them.

"Mom!" He pulled her backward with all his might, then placed himself in front of her again. He slipped and fell before he could draw his sword. It was cooler and less smoky on the floor; he could feel the wind blowing in from outside.

Hugo stood up. Two Talsh soldiers noticed that Hugo had a sword and leveled their weapons at him and his mother. Hugo drew his sword hastily. He blocked the first soldier's blow, but the second man cut his side open. Hugo felt a burning pain in his stomach and nearly dropped his weapon.

His mother screamed.

If he stayed down, the Talsh would kill them. Hugo sprang to his feet despite the pain. He noticed that the Talsh used swords that were shorter than Yogoese blades and slightly curved. Although he was much

shorter than them, his weapon gave him the advantage of a greater reach. The Talsh soldiers had red-gold skin that gleamed in the firelight, and golden eyes. Hugo had never seen people like that before. He didn't realize it at the time, but some of the Talsh soldiers fighting to take over the warehouse weren't much older than he was.

Hugo aimed high, cutting the nearest soldier's forehead with the tip of his blade. The soldier took a step back with blood in his eyes. The blade of his sword had broken while trying to block. The soldier attacked Hugo again, ignoring the fact that his weapon was broken.

This was the first time Hugo had ever been in a life-or-death situation. He couldn't remember a single bit of all the years of sword training that his father had given him. He focused on dodging and getting close enough to his opponent to land a strike or a slash.

There were footsteps from behind Hugo: more Talsh soldiers. They'd cleared out the back way and the street and were coming inside to support their comrades. Hugo didn't remember much of what happened just after that. The room was too warm and red with the blood that splashed in the air and fell to the floor. He felt sure that his mother and sister had been slaughtered in the massacre.

There were two Talsh soldiers on the floor in front of him, one with a broken arm. They weren't much older than him, and both of them were dead. Aside from Hugo, there was no one left alive in this room.

What Hugo felt wasn't relief, or fear. It was despair. The room around him seemed to recede, so that he couldn't see anything or anyone in it anymore. He couldn't hear much of anything, either. It hurt to breathe. The second floor must have finally caught fire. Hugo's feet took him

toward an exit without his conscious will as he searched instinctively for some way out.

One place on the floor was wet. The world was red, but Hugo could tell that the way ahead wasn't on fire: not yet. He started running. All of the soldiers he passed were dead: consumed by fire. It was like Hugo was in some kind of protective cocoon where the fire couldn't reach. But he certainly wouldn't be protected for very long.

Soon enough, he saw soldiers again. They chased him upstairs, but all of them vanished into the sea of flames. Hugo's throat was burning, but he kept running. As he made his way up the stairs, the smoke became thicker, solidifying into a shape that he recognized.

Nahso.

Maybe she'd saved herself by becoming smoke, so that she could escape through nooks and crannies. She wasn't dead: no, of course not. Hugo was lightheaded and gasping, but the sight of his sister formed of smoke on the stairs steadied him somewhat. He smiled and followed his sister along the hallway on the second floor. Far ahead of them, he saw his mother's back, her hair streaming behind her as she fled.

Mom? Was she still alive, too?

Smoke swirled all around Hugo. He coughed and fell, unable to breathe, but he was still smiling as he crawled after his mother and sister, moving slowly along the floor. He passed by a window and stood up, then whispered to Nahso, who was close: "It's okay. I found a way out. Look."

Hugo rubbed sweat out of his eyes and took a deep breath of fresher air from outside. His lungs hurt. He took another painful breath and

kept following the smoke toward the storage rooms where wool was kept. There was a pulley in front of him that was used to move goods between floors or load cargo onto wagons.

By good luck, there were still wagons in the street. If Hugo used the pulley to get down there, he could hide in one of the wagons and wait for the soldiers to move on. Hugo wrapped himself fully in wool, then jumped into the basket attached to the pulley. His weight would make it fall to the first floor.

Follow me, mom, Nahso. He glanced up and saw his mother smiling at him.

Nahso, find a place next to me. The figure of his sister was gray-tinged and wavered in the air. She was only made of smoke, after all.

"Don't be scared," Hugo whispered. "I'm your big brother, and I'll take care of you."

Hugo hugged her, wrapping her in the same wool he was hiding in. He was sweating all over and still coughing like he was about to lose a lung, but he was alive.

The pulley chain was kind of rusted, so the descent wasn't exactly smooth. If anyone had been on the bottom to yank on the chain and slow the pulley down, they would have noticed that it was surprisingly light. Far too light for two children to be riding it down.

Hugo landed heavily and nearly lost consciousness from the shock. He might have broken bones, but he kept moving with the basket still around him. He dragged the basket and pulley chain outside, in too much of a hurry to extricate himself.

The wagons were right in front of him. Hugo coughed, gulping in air, and climbed into a wagon, where he concealed himself. A while later, the wagon began to move, and the basket he was in was lifted away from him, leaving him wrapped only in wool. No one seemed to notice.

Hugo was exhausted and injured. He was unconscious before the wagon left the street where the safe house was.

chapter two

lizardfish playing in sparks



Hugo was floating in water. He felt surrounded by it, like he was swimming while it was raining. The world around him was a deep, deep blue color. Like he thought, there was water all around, but he could see through it and breathe easily. There were some dark spots in the distance. He didn't know what they were. He blinked and realized that those dark spots looked like his mother and sister.

Hugo tried to swim closer to his family, but when he did, they dissolved and melted away as if they'd never been there.

Hugo felt like he was melting into the water, too, and he was glad. He wanted to follow his mother and sister to where they were going.

But no matter how long he waited, Hugo didn't disappear. There was something within him like a core or a seed, waiting to sprout under the right circumstances. Hugo wasn't dead, and the human world wasn't done with him yet. He didn't return to that world immediately. The water held him, and he looked around, feeling quite a bit more alert.

He noticed almost right away that the water around him now was not the pure, clean warm water that he'd awakened in. He was waist-deep in a muddy ditch, and while the water he stood in was still somewhat warm, it was practically stagnant. It was night, and he couldn't see well, though he could tell that dawn was a long way off.

How long have I been here? Where am I?

Hugo was still in the lower level of the city. He could hear carts moving and horses kicking in their stalls, alarmed by the smell of smoke. There was a shed nearby that looked like it was used for housing livestock. The sound of the horses neighing and kicking echoed loudly because of the water in the ditch. Smoke rose into the sky overhead, and the sky itself was purple-red from reflected fire.

There was something else in the sky, though at first Hugo didn't believe his eyes. Were those—fish? They were white and seemed to be swimming through the air. They weren't disturbed by the smoke. They moved with it and around it as if they were dancing.

Hugo craned his neck to get a closer look. *Those things have claws, so they aren't fish. What are they?*

He wasn't sure, but he was strangely certain that they were real. He wasn't just hallucinating because of smoke. The air was much clearer here than it had been before, and he'd recovered his senses. He wasn't sure of much else aside from the fact that he was breathing and that these mysterious lizardfish were actually here, flying above him in the dark, smoke-filled sky. He stood in the ditch and looked up. He should probably move, but he had no desire to.

It looked like the Talsh soldiers hadn't reached this place yet. They were still securing warehouses and the main streets inside the city, but they would catch up to Hugo eventually if he didn't keep running. Hugo was hurt, and he didn't want to run: not yet, and maybe not ever. He could wait for the soldiers to find him, and that would be the end of it.

The backs and stomachs of the lizardfish shone like silver in the dim light of the city on fire. Some of them gazed down at Hugo curiously, pausing in their mysterious dance. Their pupils were a deep black. Hugo only noticed now that none of the lizardfish had blinked. Maybe they couldn't.

A lizardfish drew near to Hugo and entangled one claw in his hair. It didn't hurt. The claw felt warm against the skin of his neck, but there was no actual sensation of contact. The lizardfish touching him felt like nothing more than a warm breeze.

Hugo heard a voice that sounded like it was calling out to him. Footsteps grew louder, coming from the direction of the barn, and a shadow fell over Hugo's face.

The wind picked up, cool and crisp. There was a woman standing over Hugo, hair blowing over her shoulders. She was looking at him as if she wasn't sure that he was alive or dead. Hugo forced himself to breathe deeply, even though his lungs ached with the effort. He tried to move his hands, and felt them twitch in the water of the ditch.

The woman gasped. She crouched down and gripped Hugo's arms, pulling him out of the ditch. She set him down on the ground, but she didn't let him go. That was lucky. Hugo knew instantly that he'd be unable to stand without help. Everything hurt—and hurt suddenly.

While he'd been in the ditch, he'd barely felt any physical sensations at all, but now, it all came back to him in a rush.

"Ow." Hugo gritted his teeth. His eyes wouldn't focus on anything. It took everything he had to stay on his feet, even with the woman's assistance. He wanted to throw up, and swallowed heavily so that he wouldn't.

The woman shifted, bringing her arm under Hugo's shoulders so that they could walk together. Hugo felt his broken ribs grinding against one another with each new step forward, and he groaned. He and the woman left the main road and the canal far behind, fleeing along a dirt path. The woman decided that Hugo wasn't walking fast enough and stopped supporting him. She was getting farther and farther ahead of him, moving briskly and uphill.

Hugo had no idea where she was headed, and he didn't ask. He focused on putting one foot in front of the other. He could remain upright without losing his balance now, but he felt like he was about to fall at any moment.

Rumor of the Talsh attack in the heart of the capital was spreading. Many people were crouched down behind buildings beside the dirt path. They pointed and whispered as the woman and Hugo passed them by, but no one tried to help them. Anyone caught helping survivors of the battle would very likely be killed on the spot.

No one helped them, but no one alerted the soldiers, either. The people allowed Hugo and the woman to pass unmolested and unreported. Some people acted like they couldn't see Hugo or the woman at all.

The woman who'd saved him came to a fork in the path and glanced furtively around, as if she expected a trap. The path was no longer straight, but twisted and turned. She kept following it, and she seemed to know where she was going. Sometimes, she stopped and stood near a wall to rest. She didn't sit. Hugo got the sense that if she stopped to sit, she wouldn't get up again. He understood that feeling. It took everything he had to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

The woman finally stopped in front of a house. There was a storehouse next to it, and a small tributary of the city's large canal ran right beside it. She put her back to the wall of the house and sat down. She looked at Hugo, who was exhausted, gasping and in pain.

The canal and its tributaries were all lit along the sides, so it was easy for Hugo and the woman to see. The fires of war hadn't reached this part of the city yet. Hugo noticed that there was another house across the street from the one he was facing. There was no light coming from most of the windows of the houses, but there was a light inside the house across the street. It was faint, but there.

The woman shifted a little and reached out to Hugo, resting her hand lightly on his shoulder. One of those strange lizardfish was wrapped around his neck, so the woman looked like she was touching it. The lizardfish responded to her touch by making a strange, guttural sound low in its throat. It reminded Hugo of a cat purring.

Hugo hadn't noticed before, but the woman had a lizardfish around her neck, too. He sensed that these strange creatures had been frightened, and were relieved to be away from danger. How did he know that? He looked at the woman. He hadn't felt anything about the

creature around his neck until she'd touched it. Could she understand them, and interpret how they felt for other people?

The woman hadn't said a single word since they'd met, but there were times when he could understand what she was thinking. It was like she was relaying her thoughts to him through the lizardfish that were wrapped around their necks. He couldn't claim that he understood her, exactly: what he received from her were brief sensory impressions, like an inconstant breeze blowing in through the gaps in a set of storm shutters.

A chill went up Hugo's spine. Should he be scared of this woman? His shoulders went rigid, and he took an involuntary step back.

The door to the house in front of Hugo and the woman suddenly opened. A middle-aged man came outside and called out, "Ryuan! Where did you go? It's the middle of the night!"

The woman, Ryuan, gestured for silence. The man noticed her movement and turned toward her. He also saw that she wasn't alone. "Who are you, then?" the man whispered.

Hugo didn't answer.

"I guess I've got no choice but to hear you out." The man smacked his lips and turned toward Ryuan. "Did you go where the fires are, again? The smoke's real bad, even here. So you saved some kid over there, huh?"



Ryuan didn't say anything, but the man kept talking as if she were capable of replying. His eyes fixed on Hugo. He was still wearing his sword belt and scabbard. The man took him in,

frowning severely. Commoners didn't carry swords. Granted, Hugo had lost his sword for the moment, but there was no reason for him to be carrying a sword if he were simply an ordinary child. There was also a dagger tucked into the belt--it was still there. Hugo had thought that he'd lost that, too.

"You..."

Hugo sensed that Ryuan wanted to go in the house. It wasn't safe for them to talk outside. The man didn't seem to sense her feelings, and if he did, he ignored them. She made hand gestures, and the man nodded in understanding. Maybe that was how Ryuan and the man communicated.

"Fine," the man said, "let's go in. Wouldn't want to wake the neighbors." His expression was resigned. Hugo thought he seemed irritated, but he did help support Hugo as he walked inside.

Moving made Hugo so dizzy that he blacked out, and when he came to, he was lying down inside the house, and it was dark. There was no one around, so Hugo closed his eyes and went to sleep.

chapter three

ryuan



The bell that marked the time in the city started ringing in the distance. It was noon. The sound of the bell was coming from the north. The people who heard it were relieved by the semblance of normalcy after the ferocity of the previous night's attack.

Hugo awoke from dreams of fire, sweating all over. He was wandering in a fever, and all his limbs felt heavy. A cold palm settled over his forehead. Hugo wanted to see who it was, but even opening his eyes was a struggle. His breathing was harsh and irregular; breathing too deeply made everything hurt.

Taking deeper breaths did help clear Hugo's head, a little. He felt a pillow under his head. Finally, he forced his eyes open and looked up at the girl checking his fever.

She was sixteen or seventeen years old--so, not more than three or four years older than him. She appeared kind, and was frowning down at Hugo, concerned about his condition. He didn't know who she was.

Most of the women Hugo had seen in his life wore their glossy black hair loose and long, but this girl's hair was only shoulder-length. It was black, but not smooth, and there were reddish highlights when the sun

shone on it. Her collar and sleeves had been torn and imperfectly mended several times. Her clothes were clean, but very old.

The girl's features were plain, but her eyes were striking. Hugo had never seen a Yogoese person with reddish-brown eyes before.

Hugo had seen one of those strange lizardfish winding around the woman's neck last night. Remembering that made him recall everything else: the battle, the fire...following this girl, Ryuan, home. In the darkness, he'd thought that she was older.

The worst memory was his mother and sister's screams. He'd blocked that out yesterday, but he could hear them now as if they were still happening. He closed his eyes.

Ryuan's compassion washed over him. There was a lizardfish around her neck, and his, and she used that connection to try to console him. He didn't understand any words. It was like she was whispering, albeit in a soothing tone.

But Hugo didn't want to be comforted. He tried to grip the lizardfish that was clinging to him and fling it away, but that didn't work. His hand passed right through the mysterious creature. He could feel and see that it was there, but there was no sensation of contact when his hand touched it, only a gentle warmth.

"Shit! What the hell is this thing? A monster?"

Hugo pressed his palms to the floor and tried to jump to his feet. That was a mistake: he collapsed almost immediately with agony racing through all four limbs and compounding in his skull. He felt like he was being ripped open. He curled in on himself on his bedding, suppressing the urge to vomit.

His throat and eyes ached from the smoke, and the wound in his side was on fire. Could he live with such pain? He had to endure it, somehow. Tears leaked from his eyes. He gritted his teeth and tried to control himself, but everything hurt too badly. He wept openly, hugging himself.

Hugo's mother and sister were dead.

If only mom had listened to me when I asked...

If his mother hadn't been so stubborn about saving everyone, she might still be alive. Should he have dragged her? Forced her somehow? But even if he had, Nahso would still have run away.

Hugo wasn't mad at his mother and sister for dying. He didn't resent them for not following him. He blamed himself for their failure to escape. All he could remember when he thought of them now were their last desperate screams as the Talsh poured into the building as fast as the fire consuming it.

He should have caught Nahso's hand. He should have told his mother and sister his entire plan so that they would understand it. He'd been too slow: that was all there was to it. He would never see them again, no matter how much he wanted to.

Ryuan watched over Hugo in silence, staying completely still. When it seemed like he'd calmed down somewhat, she got up and ladled some water from a barrel by the door into a cup for him. She knelt down next to Hugo again. She put the cup down, then helped Hugo sit up a little so that he could drink.

The cool water felt soothing to Hugo's cracked lips and parched throat. Some of the pain in his head and chest eased. After he finished

the water in the cup, Ryuan helped him stretch out on his back again and rearranged his blankets so that he could go back to sleep.

While he slept, Hugo's grief seized hold of his chest, covering him all over. He felt like he was sinking in quicksand or in mud that had no bottom. Although his grief remained as a clinging, cloying thing, his rage dissipated. It would do no good to be angry now: not at himself, and not at the Talsh.

Hugo awoke feeling drained and depressed. The whole world seemed to recede; it felt far away, like it couldn't touch him. His violent fit of crying left him exhausted, but without his rage, he was also afraid. Not of Talsh, but of being alone.

The young woman was still next to Hugo, sorting through laundry.

"You're...Ryuan, right?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Why did you save me?" he asked. Talking to Ryuan brought his surroundings into sharper focus.

Ryuan couldn't speak, of course—but the lizardfish creature could. Although Hugo had never heard it speak any words before, he could understand it now, just as well as he could understand the words of a person.

"I can talk to you because you found a taramu." Hugo wasn't hearing with his ears—he knew that—but it seemed to him that the creature had a peculiar accent. He learned later that the lizardfish (and by extension, Ryuan) was speaking the type of language that commoners used. Hugo was the son of a warrior and a nobleman and was used to a

different way of speaking. Hugo didn't look down on the common people. He never had, and to do so now would be beyond foolish, since Ryuan had saved his life.

"What's a taramu?" Hugo asked.

"The creatures that are around our necks. I call them taramu for convenience."

Ryuan blushed. If she'd had a voice, she might be giggling. Hugo got the sense from the lizardfish—taramu?—that she was embarrassed, as if 'taramu' was a childish nickname or something. She looked down at the lizardfish wrapped around her neck and patted it affectionately. Hugo watched her fingers go right through it, just like his did when he tried to touch the one attached to him. It was a peculiar sight.

"Taramu love fire." Ryuan continued talking through the lizardfish. "You'll find them wherever there's a blaze."

Hugo remembered the taramu leaping above the flames in the evening sky, as if they'd been dancing. "What are they, though?" Hugo asked. "I've never seen them before."

"I don't really know," Ryuan responded. "I know that some people can see them, and that most people can't. You can see them now, even though you never did before."

Hugo remembered locking eyes with a taramu for the first time. Now that he thought of it, the taramu had probably been just as surprised to see him as he'd been to see it. His eyebrows drew together. "What does it mean? Why can I see taramu? Why can they see me? Have they always been there and I just didn't notice? And how can you talk through them? Isn't that...weird?"

Ryuan seemed uncertain. "There are...a lot of things that I don't understand." She stared at the floor, then closed her eyes. White sunlight streamed through the open window, onto the floor. The light was creeping up to her knees when she opened her eyes.

"When I was little," Ryuan began cautiously, "I thought I was dead, for a little while. I don't remember it very well, but my father told me that I fell down a well and almost drowned. I don't think it was a well. There was water, and it was dark, but I didn't fall into it. The water was...all around me, all of a sudden, but I could still breathe."

Hugo recognized parts of her experience as being similar to his own. He'd woken up surrounded by water after his mother and sister had died. He leaned forward a little, eager to hear the rest of what Ryuan had to say.

"The water was so blue. I've never seen anything like that. Blue all over, and very intense, with no variation in color. I felt like I'd been swallowed up and that there was no way out, but I wasn't dead, and it didn't feel dangerous or anything.

"I don't remember what happened after that. The next thing I knew, my dad was holding me. And after that...everything changed. Everything. I used to be able to talk, you know, but I can't. Not anymore. My voice just...won't come out."

Hugo blinked. He saw the bright blue water surrounding him again, and the shadows of his mother and sister fading into it. When he blinked again, all of that bright blue water vanished. He knew that he and Ryuan had seen the same thing, more or less, but he didn't know

why. At the time, he'd thought that he was dreaming, but Ryuan seemed to think it was real.

"How many times have you seen it?" Hugo asked.

"Four," Ryuan answered.

"And you can only speak through the taramu now? Did that happen after the first time you saw it?"

Ryuan shook her head. "At first, I couldn't talk at all. I only met the taramu two years ago." Her expression appeared pained. Hugo got the impression that he'd touched a sore spot on accident. Her jaw clenched, but she kept telling Hugo what had happened.

"There was a fire. At the time, we were living in the eastern part of the city. There was a restaurant next to our house, and it caught fire around lunchtime. I was away at the time, but when I came back, our house was gone.

"Dad was at work. I got home before him. I knew that he was probably all right, but my mom--my mom was at home. I was so scared that I would find her, all burned up..." Ryuan's hands shook. She pet the taramu around her neck to steady herself.

"There was a taramu there--just a little one, maybe a baby. I think it came because of the fire. It went inside the house by climbing on the smoldering roof and lowering itself through the chimney. I tried to scream and warn the taramu that it was dangerous, but no sound came out.

"Hey, you!" I called out. "Do you see anything in there? Is my mom..." Ryuan looked down. "That was when one of the taramu came to me

from the burning house, and wrapped itself around my neck.

"And...I saw her. My mom. She was crying in the doorway. I could see her face clearly, but the rest of her body was like smoke. I think the taramu let me see her, one last time. It's from the world of spirits, and can see other spirits, even though we can't.

"The taramu told me to go inside the house, then pointed its head at the back door. 'She's there, she's there,' it said."

"If she was by the back door, didn't she get out?" Hugo asked. Why would Ryuan's mother be a spirit if she'd escaped the fire, though?

"She got out," Ryuan said. "I found her in the yard, but she'd inhaled too much smoke. She got really sick after that, and then she died. I think if I'd rushed inside and gotten her away from the burning house faster, she might still be alive."

Ryuan rubbed tears out of her eyes, then took a deep breath. "Anyway, that's how I met the taramu. That's why I can talk to you. I can speak to my mother's spirit this way, too. I was really happy about that. I want dad to be able to talk to her, too, but he can't see the taramu, so they won't go around his neck. I've never met another person who could see them, aside from you."

Ryuan smiled. It looked like it hurt something in her, to smile like that, but there could be no doubt that she was an exceptionally kind person.

"Did you go where the fires are, again? The smoke's real bad, even here. So you saved some kid over there, huh?"

Hugo remembered that Ryuan's father had asked her that last night, when she'd brought Hugo home. "So you've been looking for others, then."

Ryuan nodded. When she noticed the hoarseness of his voice, her eyes widened slightly in alarm. "Your throat must hurt because of the smoke," she said through the taramu. "I'll get you some ohru." Ohru was fruit juice mixed with honey. "We should probably clean your wound again, so it doesn't get infected."

Hugo glanced down at his injured side. It was bandaged and didn't hurt unless he moved. It looked like the bleeding had stopped, but it was probably a good idea to change the bandage.

Ryuan helped Hugo sit up straight, then unwound the blood-soiled bandage. She brought in water to clean the wound, then re-wrapped it with clean rags. Her hands were rough, but he didn't complain. Having the wound clean made his head feel clearer.

Hugo was somewhat disturbed by the fact that he didn't really know where he was. He'd only met Ryuan the previous night. She seemed kind and trustworthy enough, but what about her father and the other people that lived on this street? But There wasn't much he could do at the moment. He wasn't well enough yet to flee...and if he fled, where would he go?

Ryuan helped Hugo lie down again, and he went back to sleep.



Ryuan and her father, Yoar, went fishing in the canal during the early evening. They caught small fish, scaled and boned them, and preserved their meat in brine. Yoar sold the jars of preserved fish to make a living. He came inside late, reeking of fish guts and looking none too pleased about it.

The preserved fish was pretty good, especially when cooked with rice and fresh vegetables. The meal was a simple one, but it was hot and filling. Yoar glanced over at Hugo's scabbard as they ate.

"You're one of them, then? The Mikado's Shields?"

Hugo said nothing in reply. Yoar paused for a moment, then continued speaking.

"You're wearing the same clothes as a merchant's son, and your haircut is a generic one, but anyone would be able to guess that from your scabbard. I've heard rumors that the rest of you are hiding in safe houses around the city, and that the Talsh have orders to kill you all." He sighed. "Besides, it's easy to tell you've been through some bad trouble."

Hugo gritted his teeth. Staying here would put Yoar and Ryuan in danger. He kept quiet, waiting for Yoar to ask him to leave. He would find his way and keep himself safe some way, right?

That was what Hugo tried to tell himself. He should be stoic, like a warrior, but the thought of being on his own again when he was so weak and hurt overwhelmed him. He set his plate of food aside so that he wouldn't drop it as tears coursed down his cheeks. He hid his face in his empty hands.

Yoar was usually a quick and plainspoken speaker, but now, he spoke gently and quietly. "You've seen us. You know that we are poor. We can

feed you for a week or two, but after that, your being here will cause more than one serious problem. For now, rest and recover. I understand that you might hate the Talsh and want your revenge, but you won't be able to avenge yourself until you get better."

Yoar had heard about the attack on the warehouse that Hugo had fled from that morning, when he'd gone to the market to sell fish. That was how he knew that people associated with the Mikado's elite imperial guardsmen were being targeted by Talsh. He'd been curious enough about the rumors to go to the warehouse himself.

The burned warehouse was a sight that Yoar would never forget. The corpses of the fallen were left where they were; Yoar guessed that Talsh was trying to make an example of them. Yoar had never witnessed such heartless cruelty before in his life.

No one came to bury the bodies. Those who tried were rebuffed by more Talsh soldiers. It had been almost a full day since the start of Talsh's attack, and no one had buried any of the dead.

While looking over the carnage at the warehouse, Yoar understood that Yogo would lose the war. He considered it already lost.



The Yogoese people were accustomed to war. Horam and Orm were at their borders, and when they weren't fighting one another they were often fighting Yogo. Yogo also had more than its own fair share of internal strife.

However, over the past few years, Yogo had enjoyed a brief and unusual period of peace, because the Talsh Empire was keeping the nation's ancient enemies occupied. After Talsh conquered Horam and Orm, the empire turned its sights on Yogo.

The years of peace made Yogo more unprepared for war than they would have been otherwise, and there would be no aid from their neighboring nations, which were already under Talsh dominion. Food prices shot up overnight as Yogo struggled to feed its army. Other necessities couldn't be bought for money or bartered for: there were constant shortages. The Mikado forced conscription from Yogoese families, sending men to war who knew little of it against their will.

Men died in battle against the Talsh, or died of starvation at home. Some Yogoese people turned against their own countrymen and became bandits and scavengers, stealing indiscriminately in order to stay alive.

Hoshiro, the Imperial City, was the best-defended, and the last to fall. The gates that protected the city were all burned, and the sky was stained red with reflected fire. Those fortunate enough to survive the night would remember the echoing of the Talsh war drums over the city until their dying day. It seemed like the end of the world—and it was, at least, the end of the world as they knew it.

No one slept in the city that night. At daybreak, the sun shone off the Talsh soldiers' long pikes and polished armor. There were so many of them marching through the city that they resembled an army of ants. Rain might have helped put out the fires, but no rain fell: Yogo had been suffering from drought long before the Talsh army showed up.

After the outer city was destroyed, the Talsh army marched to the Imperial Palace. They burned the gates there, too, and killed all the guards inside. They took the Mikado hostage, but there was no news of anyone else being spared. The people of the capital were devout believers in Ten no Kami, but no miracle occurred to save them. Those who survived were disillusioned. The Mikado was alive, but taken: the Talsh Empire intended to use him instead of kill him. Perhaps that could be seen as a miracle of sorts, but it wouldn't save any of Yogo's people. The Mikado couldn't reverse the terrible damage done to the city, or bring anyone back to life.

At the end of winter, the Talsh army marched down the city's main thoroughfare carrying eight large baskets. They passed beyond the burned gates that led to the ruined Imperial Palace. The people living along the street watched them go with stone-faced expressions.

If the Mikado really was descended from Ten no Kami, then how could the filthy Talsh touch him? That should have been impossible. No one had seen him leave the palace. Many people believed that if he was taken from the city by force, lightning would strike the palace and destroy the rest of the city, rather than letting it fall into enemy hands.

But none of that happened. After the initial attack, the Talsh didn't destroy the city further. There was no lightning in the sky.

Some people clung to their beliefs despite the evidence to the contrary. The Mikado couldn't possibly be inside one of those baskets the Talsh soldiers were carrying. The Talsh hadn't managed to oust him from the palace. If they had, then where was Ten no Kami? Had their god abandoned them? No, impossible.

Some days later, the Talsh army opened one of the gates in the lower city to the public. A temporary courtyard of fine white sand had been built beyond it, and on the sand, the corpses of the Mikado's protectors lay in neat rows, still bloody and wearing armor. Most of the bodies were lacking heads.

The people of the city were shocked to their core at that Talsh army's brutality. The believers who had clung to their faith in the Mikado for so long could no longer deny the facts: the Mikado was gone, taken by Talsh, and Yogo now belonged to the Talsh Empire. If Ten no Kami was involved at all, then the god must have agreed to this atrocity for some reason.

Talsh soldiers started moving into the city, occupying empty homes and building others over the ashes left behind by their attack. The city looked like a dust cloud or an anthill from a distance, so busy were the Talsh soldiers with their rebuilding efforts. The streets were thick with people scurrying to and fro. Familiar roads now led to new buildings, new plazas.

The Talsh army rebuilt the walls around the city and the gates they'd burned in the architectural style of their own culture. They set up four towers, one at each corner of the city; soldiers were stationed in those towers day and night. Yogo's soldiers and anyone who resisted Talsh rule were executed as traitors to the empire. Little by little, the Talsh Empire brought Yogo to heel, and what little resistance remained was crushed beneath soldiers' boots.

The rebuilding efforts were still underway when a large group of people entered the city through the main gate. They wore richly colored

garments and flew gaudy banners with foreign lettering on them. Behind them was a long wagon train full of supplies and luxury items.

Some of the people were Talsh, but most were Ormese. Talsh had conquered Orm before it had conquered Yogo. The people and wagon train moved along Hoshiro's main street, spreading word of the Talsh Emperor's compassion and mercy. They brought out food from the wagons and distributed it free of cost. Food had been difficult to come by since the drought had afflicted Yogo's fields starting a few years before. The starving people of the city were grateful for the Talsh Empire's generosity. The spectacle had another purpose, which it also achieved: the Talsh Empire was obscenely wealthy, and they wanted their conquests to know it.

As the days continued, the last pockets of resistance against the Talsh Empire in Yogo died out. It was true that the Talsh Empire had cruelly killed the Mikado's Shields and men in the army, but they hadn't killed any common people--at least, not the ones who didn't resist them. Rumors spread that those who swore allegiance to Talsh would receive a share of the empire's wealth. People who chose to throw their lot in with the Talsh army were paid better than Yogoese citizens and were given nice homes to live in.



Yoar couldn't forget the terrible sight of the burned warehouse that Hugo had fled from. A few people had managed to flee, just like Hugo had, but they'd been caught and hanged on a blackened beam of the

warehouse. One of those people was a child, burned almost past recognition.

Yoar tried to eat his lunch, but food wouldn't stay down. *What did that poor child do, to deserve such a thing? They must have been so scared...and then the soldiers killed them. Not quickly, either. The Talsh hurt them. Hurt and killed children...*

Yoar's stomach turned over. He remembered the terrible fear that had gripped the city on the night of the attack. Talsh had spared no soldiers, and none of their relatives. Their ruthless efficiency was alarming. If the Talsh army learned that Yoar and his daughter were harboring Hugo, they would certainly be killed.

But driving Hugo out, or turning him in, was out of the question. Yoar remembered Hugo's face when Ryuan had led him home. He could barely stand then, and he was still severely injured. Yoar wasn't like the Talsh: he couldn't make a child suffer so terribly and so unfairly.

If we can get him away from the soldiers, he might be all right, Yoar thought. Other people must have seen Hugo and Ryuan while they were escaping the warehouse, but no Talsh soldiers had come to his door. His neighbors were the sort to keep to themselves. If he could find a safe place to send Hugo, all of them might be able to continue living in safety.

Yoar talked over what he was thinking with Hugo. Hugo's face fell, but he nodded. "I'll leave when I can. Thank you so much for all your help."

Hugo told Yoar that he'd fled to the second floor of the warehouse during the attack. Soldiers had followed him upstairs, but by that point,

the roof was on fire, so his pursuers probably thought he was dead.

That relieved Yoar somewhat, and partially explained why no one was looking for Hugo yet.

Yoar and Ryuan cleaned up the house after dinner. They sat down across from one another, looking at the floor while a small fire burned in a pit before them. No one spoke. Noises from the street were clearly audible through the house's thin walls: dogs howling, drunk men singing and shouting, footsteps. Hugo went to bed again, but the strange noises all around him made it difficult to fall asleep.

The estates belonging to the Mikado's Shields were completely silent that night: silent and burned, like the warehouse Hugo had escaped from. Hugo thought about his home as he'd left it, everything clean and tidy, and realized that he would never see it again. Even if, by some miracle, the house was still standing, he would never be able to go home.

Hugo stayed awake for a long time, looking at the ceiling of Yoar and Ryuan's house.

chapter four

ashes



Hugo stayed in Ryuan's house, hidden and recovering, for five days before he finally went outside.

He took a deep breath of early morning air. His wounded side and broken ribs still hurt, but the cool, clear air was soothing. There were no other people that he could see. There was a house across the street and one that shared a wall with Ryuan's, but the neighborhood was a sleepy one. Ryuan told him that the neighbors would leave him alone as long as he didn't draw attention to himself, and that really did seem to be true. He felt lucky to have landed here, of all places. He was still afraid of what Talsh might do if they found him, but for the moment, he seemed to be safe.

There was one other stroke of good luck: though there were notice boards all over the city listing names and descriptions of missing soldiers and people wanted by Talsh, Hugo's name was never listed. Yoar kept checking the notice boards, but there was no danger in harboring Hugo for the moment, so he allowed Hugo to stay.

Those first five days staying concealed in the house made Hugo a little crazy. He wanted to get out. As soon as Yoar was reasonably sure that no one was coming after Hugo, he allowed Hugo to go outside.

Being outside was progress, but Hugo couldn't stay here forever. He'd sewn three silver lugals into his belt, but aside from that, he had no money. Three silver lugals was a lot for a common person, but Hugo had no place to stay aside from Yoar's house. If he tried to go somewhere, he would need to pay for inns and for food. The money wouldn't last long.

Three silver lugals was also too much for a commoner to be carrying around. It might arouse suspicion if he were searched at the gate leading out of the city. The Talsh searched everyone who tried to leave. If he wanted to blend in, he would need to break his money into smaller denominations.

So it seemed that Hugo would be trapped in the lower city for a while. He didn't have enough money to get far away from here, and he had too much to blend in among the other street urchins. He was still alive, and he was grateful for that, but he didn't understand why he had lived when everyone else he knew and loved was dead.

He had to stay in the lower city, but he didn't know how he was supposed to live there. He couldn't keep living on charity. Yoar and Ryuan had helped him more than enough already, and they were too poor to support him forever.

First things first: Hugo's wounds had to heal before he could do anything. He understood that he could probably find work, if he looked for it, though he wasn't sure what he could do. No one would hire him as a warrior, if he even wanted to advertise himself as such.

Ryuan watched Hugo walking outside from the doorway. She looked concerned, but she didn't try to speak to him through the taramu. Hugo

knew from the start that she was kind, but in the past five days, she hadn't uttered a single word of complaint, and she always treated him with compassion. She was like that with everyone, and everything. She couldn't even bring herself to kill the rats that came sniffing around her father's jars of dried and pickled fish.

It had been a fairly short time, but Hugo was as attached to Ryuan as if she were his sister. She treated his injuries and comforted him when he dreamed of the fire. His mother and sister were always there, in the flames. He tried to save them, but he was always too late, and they melted into smoke before his eyes. Talsh soldiers without faces pursued him down a burning hallway. Sometimes, they caught him, and he awoke from his dream. Other times, he kept running until the smoke seared his lungs, and he woke up choking and coughing like he was dying.

Ryuan always patted his back until he stopped coughing. Her hands were warm and her touch was light. He listened to her wringing out the washing at night and came to associate the sound with safety. He had nightmares every night for a few weeks after the Talsh attack on the city, but over time, he was able to sleep without nightmares. He still had them sometimes, but he had no trouble sleeping through the night when Ryuan was there.

Hugo leaned on Ryuan unselfconsciously at night, but in the morning, he was always ashamed of how much of his fear he'd allowed her to see.



"I want to get better faster," Hugo grumbled. "All I do is lie in bed all day. I should walk around more and get some exercise."

Ryuan frowned at him. "Should you? Won't it hurt?"

"I've broken my ribs before, during sword training. The worst of it is over, and I'm used to that kind of pain."

The sunlight outside seemed brighter after Hugo's days of confinement inside. He hadn't really gotten to walk around much or see anything during his brief forays outside before, so when Ryuan finally let him go out unattended, he used the time to explore.

The first thing he noticed aside from the bright sun was the birds. There were dozens of pure white birds perched on the roof of Ryuan's house, looking down at him with beady black eyes.

Ryuan came out of the house, startling the birds. They all took flight from the roof at the same time. Ryuan didn't react at all. She must be used to seeing the birds. The sunlight reflected off of Ryuan's light-colored clothes, making her difficult to look at for very long. Was the world always this bright?

Hugo watched the white birds fly off together toward the canal behind the house. He pointed at them excitedly and asked, "What are those? Do you know?"

Ryuan smiled. "Haven't you seen them before? They usually gather on the roof in the morning. I think they want to be near me."

"They just look like birds to me. Do other people see them?"

She shrugged. "They like eating bugs. I've seen them cross between the normal world and the other world whenever they catch sight of

something tasty. They can eat bugs from both worlds, you see. So sometimes other people see them, and sometimes they don't. Dad saw one disappear once, I think."

Ryuan's eyes tracked the birds as they flew away. Not for the first time, Hugo thought that Ryuan's abilities to see this mysterious new world were very strange. He could see the birds now, too, which meant that he must also be strange. He frowned.



One day while Hugo was resting in bed, a middle-aged man came to the house. Yoar was absent, but that was all right: the man had come to see Ryuan. He set ten copper lugal in front of her and bowed his head deeply. "Please," he said. "I need your help, miss."

Ryuan nodded, then left the house with the man. She stayed out all day and into the evening. Hugo started to worry, but Yoar told him not to fret. She came back before dawn, looking tired.

When Hugo asked her where she'd gone, she said that the man had asked her to search for a good place to build a new well. In the district of the city where he lived, the water had all dried up. Ryuan could see how water moved under the earth, so sometimes, people would come to her and ask for her advice.

"You can really see how water flows underground?" Hugo asked.

Ryuan shrugged. "I don't see the water on this side. I see it on the other side. But water seems to be connected on both sides, in certain

places." She struggled to explain exactly what it was she saw to Hugo. He understood that she was seeing the other world again, and that there were places where the normal world and the other world overlapped.

Hugo also learned from Ryuan that the taramu were like the white birds he'd seen. They could cross between the worlds easily, and would whenever there was a fire that they were attracted to. Ryuan said that places where the world connected were marked by little white flowers that she called sig sara. More sig sara bloomed in the other world than in this one, but she'd seen sig sara blooming in this world, too. She said she'd tell Hugo if she saw one--maybe he'd be able to see the flowers, too.

Finding the flowers always made Ryuan happy, not because they were beautiful, but because their presence indicated that there was water nearby. Yogo had been suffering from drought for quite some time, so finding water was always a cause for celebration. Ryuan was unusually animated as she told him what she saw.

"It's always dark here where there's water, but on the other side, it's different. It's like the sun is always shining. It's so beautiful, watching the flowers bloom on the riverbank in the other world."

Hugo wondered if other people in the city could see the flowers. He'd never seen one. A chill went up his spine.



One day, Ryuan approached Hugo before going out. "I promised to do some mending for a neighbor. Will you come with me to deliver it?" she asked, extending her basket full of mended clothes for him to see.

Hugo nodded. Ryuan smiled and gestured for him to follow her outside. He noticed right away that they were moving away from the familiar neighborhood where Hugo usually walked. He'd never been to this part of the city before. At first, he slowed down a little, cautious and wary, but walking felt so good that he was all but skipping by the time they'd walked a mile or so.

Hugo and Ryuan passed by a stand of flowering shumaku trees during their journey. The flowers were peach-colored and sweetly scented. A gentle breeze wafted their scent through the air. It wasn't winter anymore: shumaku trees only flowered in spring.

Ryuan pointed to a small shop along the side of the road. She went inside, and Hugo followed, feeling the light spring breeze fluttering his hair. Ryuan passed her mending basket to an older woman who was working behind the shop counter. The woman retrieved a few coins from her purse and passed them to Ryuan.

Suddenly, the woman's eyes fixed on Hugo. "Who are you? Wait..." She thought for a moment, then gestured for him to come closer.

Hugo approached the woman, but he hunched his shoulders and looked down, trying to hide his face.

"I remember you," the woman said. "You're the boy that Ryuan saved from that warehouse fire, right?"

Hugo looked reflexively at Ryuan in alarm. Ryuan was still calm, but her face clouded over. "Dad's no good at lying," she said apologetically

through the taramu around her neck. "He told her the truth, I guess."

The woman noticed their panicked expressions and waved her hand dismissively. She smiled. "Don't worry, young man. I'm not of a mind to rat you out to the soldiers. Besides, everyone who lives around here are old friends. I wouldn't be able to live here any longer if I decided to sell out a kid like you."

The woman was an extremely fast talker. She kept speaking without pausing for air. "I know you've been through a lot," she said kindly. "They took the corpses from the warehouse and piled them up in a wagon; I saw them. They took them away to be burned up, along with a lot of others. I heard that the Talsh dumped their ashes in the canal."

Hugo's blood pounded in his ears. He stared at the woman for a long while, then hung his head. He turned his back on Ryuan and the woman and went back outside.

"Where is the warehouse from here?" Hugo asked Ryuan.

Ryuan thought for a moment before answering. She nodded decisively, then pointed. "This way."

Ryuan didn't object to leading Hugo to the warehouse, but he felt her disapproval through the taramu. The warehouse was completely destroyed. There was nothing Hugo could do now. Going back now would only bring trouble.

Hugo knew all that, but he was determined to see the warehouse regardless. He followed Ryuan down a narrow street that ran along the canal. The street led to a wider one, and Hugo caught sight of what remained of the warehouse from across a wide stone plaza. The roof

was gone, as were the wooden walls. Only the foundation and a few blackened beams remained.

Like the woman had said, there were no corpses. The stone of the street had been washed clean of ash and soot, and the buildings to either side of the warehouse were already being repaired. Anyone who hadn't witnessed the attack might assume that the warehouse was consumed by a tragic accidental fire.

"I smell parchment," Ryuan said. "And...wool?"

Hugo stared at the place where the warehouse's door should be. He heard his sister calling out his name and closed his eyes.

Hugo took a deep breath. He was all alone in the world now. His family and friends were all gone, and he didn't even know where. The Talsh hadn't even given them the dignity of a decent burial. Hugo felt numb inside, and thought that he might feel that way forever. Something within him had been seared out by the fire, and only cold ashes remained there now.

Hugo gritted his teeth. Tears overflowed in his eyes. He stayed standing, but his knees shook. "This...is the last time," he whispered. "It's the last time I'll ever cry, dad. I promise."

Hugo sat in the shadowed gap between two buildings, cradled his head in both hands, and cried until he had no more tears. His family and friends were no longer in this world. His mother, father, sister, grandparents, cousins, childhood friends...Talsh had wiped them off the face of the earth. He was the son of a warrior, one of the Mikado's Shields, and he'd always expected to follow in his father's footsteps. But

that wasn't possible anymore. If Hugo wanted to live, he had to become someone else.

Leaning against the cool stone of the wall with tears leaking out of his eyes, Hugo felt his teeth start chattering. It felt like his whole body was threatening to break apart. He hugged himself and searched for a reason to keep on living, aside from hatred and revenge. Revenge was like fire: all-consuming. He didn't want to end up consumed like the warehouse--like his family. No. His family wouldn't want that for him, either.

Ryuan was whispering something to him. He felt her hand on his shoulder.

Hugo didn't push her away. He stared into space, wiping away years as they fell. If he wasn't so exhausted, he'd be enraged. Was rage a reason to fight, or was it just another road to revenge?

Hugo felt Ryuan's fingers dig into his shoulder and looked up. She stood above him and gestured around herself. The city was loud, since everyone was rebuilding after the attack, but until that moment Hugo hadn't heard anything. His grief and anger existed in a world without sound. He stood up shakily, listening to the voices of the surrounding people and carts rolling across the stone street.

He could walk, and he'd been here too long. He focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Pain lanced up his legs with every step, but he ignored it. Ryuan kept her hand on his shoulder and kept whispering soothingly as they walked slowly away from the warehouse.



Hugo didn't remember how he got back to Ryuan's house. Ryuan built a fire and brought in water to boil. Hugo watched her, but made no move to help. He gripped his own elbows and leaned heavily against the wall.

Ryuan didn't try to talk to him. She could sense that he wanted to be left alone. When the water was boiling, she pulled out a crude cup and filled it with hot water, then added a bit of honey. She passed the cup to Hugo.

The fire smoked inside the house and vented through the small chimney hole. Ryuan picked up her fishing basket and went outside. She was probably going to help Yoar bring in his catch for the day.

Hugo sipped at the hot honeyed water, still leaning against the wall. The cup was one that Ryuan had used to store ohru, so the liquid in the cup was unusually sweet. The sun began to set, bathing the room in an amber-colored glow. He smelled roasting fish; Ryuan was probably cooking dinner in the outdoor fire pit. The appetizing smell wafted through the wide-open windows.

Hugo heard the sounds of people coming outside to bring in washing or cook their own supper, but this street seemed quiet after the hustle and bustle near the warehouse. He felt a lot calmer after he finished his honeyed water.

I can't stay here forever, he thought. I have to leave.

He had to find a way to make a living. He couldn't keep relying on the kindness of strangers. He shouldn't be alive; he should have died with his mother and sister. But he was alive, and that meant that he had to earn his own way in the world. If he kept living in this way, he would have to accept that Talsh had already won. Hugo's life was over, and if he didn't build a new one out of the ashes, then he'd never have anything ever again.

Hugo remembered where the warehouse was. He looked out the window, eyes tracing the road out of sight. The bright afternoon sun had illuminated his and Ryuan's path that afternoon. No trace of his family remained in the city anywhere. The soft spring sunlight and the cleaned-up ruin of the warehouse were cruel. The world should be grieving with him, and the city should remember his family, but everyone and everything just went on like normal, as if nothing had happened.

The Talsh killed all the warriors. I understand that. But they killed their children, too...why?

The only reason Hugo could think of was that the Talsh Empire was afraid. They were afraid that children like Hugo would grow up. And if they were afraid of people like Hugo, there must be a reason for it. Hugo could be dangerous to them. He intended to be, when he grew up...but he had to grow up, first.

Hugo might be the last Yogoese warrior left in the imperial city. As long as he was alive, Yogo's traditions and knowledge wouldn't die. He would keep those things alive within himself.

Dad, wherever you are... please, watch over me.

Hugo would live as a common person, disguising himself in plain sight, but he would never stop being the person he was born to be. He might not be able to follow in his father's footsteps, but that didn't mean he couldn't make his father proud of him.

Hugo looked down at Ryuan's dirt floor as the evening shadows lengthened and started thinking about how he would live from now on. He had a lot to think about.



After dinner that night, Hugo removed one of the silver lugals from his belt and put it in front of Yoar. He sat seiza, then put his palms and forehead to the floor, thanking Yoar formally for everything he'd done.

"I thank you for keeping me safe for this long," Hugo said. "I'm well enough to walk, so I intend to leave tomorrow evening."

Yoar's forehead crinkled in a frown. "And where do you plan to go?"

"I don't know," Hugo said. "I think I'll try looking for work."

Yoar shook his head. "It will be hard for you, cruelly hard. You can walk, but you're still injured. You should rest here for a little longer."

Hugo nodded cautiously. He knew how to use a sword and how nobles lived, but he didn't even know what kinds of jobs were available in the lower city. If Yoar told him that he wasn't physically ready to work, Hugo would believe him.

"I have two more silver lugals," Hugo said. "I'll give them to you if you teach me what I need to know to make a living."

Yoar rested his chin in his hand. "Hm. You can start out by helping me with my work. Most people don't want to do it, so there's not much competition. You and I together should be able to bring in a lot more fish than just me working on my own."

Ryuan looked between Hugo and her father. She didn't speak through the taramu, but she seemed troubled. Hugo guessed that she didn't want him to go. He found it difficult to meet her eyes.

"It might be difficult for me, too, at least for a while," Yoar said. He stroked his chin and sank deeply into thought. "These are hard times, and the men who work along the canal are used to seeing me working alone. It's also hard physical work, so you won't be able to do it right away..." He frowned. "We've managed to feed and clothe you so far. If you want to work to help out, I certainly won't stop you, but..."

Yoar thought for a little longer, then said, "There's a guy I know, Mar. He owns a tavern, and might hire you on. But it's hard for me to think of a Mikado's Shield working in a common tavern. It's just...tragic."

Hugo shook his head. "It's fine. Introduce me to Mar. I'll try working there."

"I can tell that you're serious." Yoar sighed.

Hugo nodded.

"Well, if you're going to work in a tavern, you'll have to get used to being called by your first name, without honorifics," Yoar said.

"That's fine."

"You say that now, but the people there will call you by a lot of different names--most of them disrespectful and unpleasant. Are you

still sure you want to work there?"

"I am."

"All right," Yoar said. "But right now, anyone who talked to you would know you were of the warrior class. They might even guess that you're noble. I'll teach you how to talk and act, but you'll be working against your upbringing, and that's hard. If you slip up, it could be deadly for you."

Hugo nodded solemnly. "I understand. I'll do my best to learn."

"Your posture is too good." Ryuan spoke through the taramu. "I noticed it when I first saw you. You sit up straight, and you walk with your spine straight, too. No one else I know walks like that."

Hugo looked between Ryuan and Yoar with a little frown. He remembered thinking that Ryuan's accent was strange; they must think that his own speech was equally strange. He was prepared to learn, but he hadn't realized just now different his life and education had been from other people.

Yoar's gaze dropped to the sword belt Hugo was wearing. He only wore it indoors, but there was always a risk that someone might see it and recognize it. "You should throw that away," Yoar said.

Yoar was right. Hugo knew that common people weren't allowed to carry swords. Still, it was hard for him to get rid of it entirely. The sword belt was a gift from his father, and marked him as a warrior.

But he didn't need the sword belt any longer. It might even get him killed. *Someday, I'll make enough money to buy a new sword belt, and a sword to go with it.*

Hugo handed over the sword belt and scabbard to Yoar. "Get rid of these for me, and please don't tell me where you put them, ever." He unsheathed the dagger that was still in the sword belt and set it aside.

"You're keeping that knife? Why?"

Hugo wanted to keep something of his father's. "I won't carry it openly. I'll buy some leather boots and hide it."

"Leather boots, huh?" Yoar grinned. "But you won't get away with wearing those, either. The only men who wear boots like that are warriors and ruffians."

"Then I'll be a ruffian," Hugo said. He didn't actually know what a ruffian was. "And until then, I'll carry it in a satchel. No one will see."

Yoar assented, though he still looked troubled. "A lot of the workers sleep together above the tavern. If you stay there, you might be robbed. There are a lot of desperate people, so be careful."

Hugo blinked. He was learning about the new life he'd chosen. He didn't think he'd enjoy it. He could no longer see the path in front of him. He'd always envisioned a very specific future life for himself, but now, everything had changed.

Maybe he shouldn't think about it. He'd survived so far, and there was no telling what tomorrow would bring.

"I'll be careful," he said to Yoar. "I promise."

part two
life in the lower city



chapter one

the boy at the bar



The days passed in a blur of speed. At first, Hugo had no idea what he was doing, working in the tavern, but he was busy. From dawn to dusk, there was washing to be done, and cleaning, and cooking. He rolled barrels and jugs of wine as tall as he was by rolling them carefully across the ground.

The tavern opened at night. He delivered food and drink the tavern's customers and cleaned up after them. He learned that bloodstains were particularly difficult to get out of clothing and wood.

Hugo felt like he was working constantly. He fell asleep the moment he was released from work and always woke up sore and exhausted. There were eight other boys of about his age working at Mar's tavern, and the only thing they could really agree on was that Mar didn't pay them nearly enough for all the work they did. The tavern was huge and prosperous, so he likely could have afforded to pay better... but, like Hugo, many other boys in the bar didn't have anywhere else to go.

Mar didn't even feed his workers. They had to make do by eating leftovers from the kitchens, or from customers. Hugo hadn't liked that, stealing a bite or two from customers' plates, but if he didn't do it, the

other boys would. And he couldn't just let himself starve, either. Hugo felt awful about himself the first time he stole food, and the feeling persisted with repetition. He felt absolutely wretched for having to stoop that low.

The other boys didn't seem to be as bothered by their food situation as Hugo was. As they all got to know one another better, they shared food from the kitchen or extras from customers with one another, which made Hugo's life a little easier.

The cooks in the tavern all knew that food went missing between the kitchen and the tables, but they didn't say anything. If Mar ever caught one of the workers stealing food from plates, he would scold them harshly--or take the food that they'd stolen and pop it into his own mouth.

Hugo was caught by Mar, once. He'd never felt so helpless in his entire life, stuck under the thumb of the miserly old man. Was this what it was like, being a commoner? Did all of them suffer indignity on this scale?

He felt a brief flash of rage and looked up at Mar, but then he rubbed his hands against a napkin in his hand, steadying himself. As Hugo's rage cooled, he understood that it wasn't an emotion he could safely have: not here. His rage belonged to Hugo Arayutan, the nobleman's son and the warrior that his father had raised him as. If he was going to live as an ordinary person, he couldn't indulge in his old habits.

His first days in the tavern were, without question, the most difficult when it came to remembering who he was supposed to be now. The other boys shouted at the top of their voices, warning the others to get

out of the way with their crude speech. Hugo was used to speaking quietly unless there was an emergency, and he couldn't even understand what his coworkers were saying until he learned their slang himself.

Hugo was also still injured when he first started working--he wasn't fully recovered, and recovery took longer when he was constantly on his feet and had so little time to rest. But the injuries he suffered the worst from in his early days at the tavern were ones inflicted to his pride. He knew it was foolish--idiotic, even--to cling to his old pride as part of his new identity, so he learned not to show it. His emotions were subsumed into an unending, unchanging gray mood. He never felt sad, or happy, or enraged, or prideful. He decided that he would feel nothing, rather than feel those things.

But just because his emotions didn't show didn't mean he wasn't feeling them, on some level. All he'd really done was put a heavy pot lid over the boiling broth of his rage. Someday, that lid would fly off... but until that time, Hugo would keep his head down and work.



Hugo had just finished the morning cleaning and was about to head to the kitchen to help peel vegetables. It wasn't quite noon. The other tavern boys were waiting for him by the well, carrying freshly uprooted vegetables in baskets. Most of the vegetables hadn't even been washed yet. Hugo drew water from the well, then worked with the other boys to get all of the vegetables clean before peeling.

When he'd first started working at the tavern, washing and peeling vegetables was a task that Hugo was particularly bad at. He was fortunate that the other boys wanted to teach him. He crouched down, or sat, and rubbed at the skin of the vegetables until all the dirt and mud came off, then rinsed them in clean water. He was grateful that he didn't have to perform this task standing up. He was still working, but being able to do it while sitting felt like a break.

Hugo finished washing the vegetables while the other boys drifted away from him, setting up the baskets near the kitchen so they'd be easy to pick up when it was time for peeling. He discarded the muddy water from the well near a flowerbed.

"Oi! You there!"

Hugo turned. One of the cooks was waving at him. Hugo waved back, then asked if the man needed anything from him.

The cook shook his head. "You were standing there by yourself. I was worried that something was wrong." He was smiling. His cheeks were apple-red, making Hugo think he might be drunk. He held up a clean potato, staring as if he were inspecting it. "You're good at this," he said, proffering the clean potato. "Better than the others."

Hugo said nothing.

"You're good at peeling, too. Did you know that the way you peel can change the taste? I can't use badly peeled potatoes in my cooking. When you first came here, I couldn't use the potatoes you'd peeled--not a single one. But you've improved dramatically. You might not stay a tavern boy forever, if you keep improving at this rate."

Hugo had no idea what to say. He bowed politely, since that was what usually got him out of trouble. "Thank you," he said. *Peeling is peeling. Is there really that much variability in how people do it?*

Still, he knew that he was being praised. The man's speech was slangy, like the tavern boys' was, but he was also making an effort to talk clearly and slowly, so that Hugo wouldn't misunderstand him.

The cook looked him over for a few moments, then said, "You must have come from a much better place than this one."

Hugo's shoulders went rigid. He blinked in surprise.

The cook observed Hugo's reaction, then shrugged. "I wasn't trying to ask where you came from, kid. I just meant that it's obvious you've been educated. You're smart enough to follow directions, even when they're a bit complicated."

The cook was still holding the potato. He bent down to a basket and retrieved one of the small, sharp knives that the tavern boys often used to peel vegetables. "For example... you peeled this potato. I can tell, because after you peeled it, you washed it thoroughly and carefully again. The other tavern boys don't do that, not with any consistency, even though they know they should. To us in the kitchen, washing vegetables that have already been peeled is a critical step, but since you tavern boys don't see what we do, it's perceived as less important work. Out of sight, out of mind.

"I'll tell you one other reason why I know it was you who peeled this one. When the other boys re-wash the potatoes after peeling, they dig their fingers in and bruise them. I can't use potatoes for anything other than flour after that. But this one? Not a single bruise on it." His mouth

twitched upward at the corners. "And you clean the blades after they're used, too, so they don't dull as quickly. You notice everything. Nothing gets past you."

So? Hugo wanted to ask. Why did this matter? Before he could ask for an explanation, the cook spun on his heel and went back inside the tavern.

Hugo looked at the door leading to the kitchens for a while, uncertain of what he should do. He was used to being pulled in several directions at once; work was like that, and he was pretending to be someone that he wasn't. He didn't like the idea that the cook had been watching him work this whole time. He only knew the man as a drunk who worked in the tavern because it netted him a discount on liquor.

Suddenly, Hugo remembered watching his mother peel vegetables. He'd never done it himself before coming to the tavern, but he'd watched her do it several times. He felt indescribably lonely--cold inside, cold like the ashes that remained of the burned warehouse. It was an incongruous emotion. The area around the well was resplendent with bright sunshine, and the day was warm. The other tavern boys milled around him, getting ready to peel. They didn't speak to him, but he had no business feeling cold and lonely in this sun-warmed place full of people.

Hugo sighed, retrieved the now-empty bucket from the side of the well, and got back to work.



Hugo had worked in Mar's tavern for a month and a half before he and the other tavern boys received their pay. Hugo came down in the morning and noticed the other boys gathered together, whispering excitedly.

One boy saw Hugo and waved. "Oi! Come here!"

"Hugo!" Mar's voice boomed thunderously loud, quieting the tavern boys. Mar was large and corpulent; the chair he sat in creaked when he stood up. He placed a pile of leather pouches on the desk. The pouches contained the tavern boys' wages. The boys fixed their attention on the pouches, eyes shining with anticipation.

Mar tossed Hugo his wage pouch. Hugo caught it, said a quick "Thank you," then got out of the way of the other boys. He wanted to count his money, but he knew that he shouldn't get his hopes up. Mar was so much of a miser that he didn't even feed his workers. Maybe there was no money in the pouch at all.

Hugo prepared himself for that possibility, then opened the money pouch. Lowering his expectations had been a good idea; there wasn't much money in the pouch at all, but at least there was some.

Mar really is a cheapskate.

The other boys grumbled a little. One of them laughed brightly. "Well, we've just gotta hang in there a little longer. Eventually we'll be promoted to full-time waiters, and won't have to do all this extra stuff. I've heard that some customers give tips to waiters."

Hugo and some of the other boys nodded. It was true that a lot of customers to the tavern were regulars, and they usually tipped the servers that they knew well. Hugo thought that the tavern boys' wages

were also taken from tips--he'd heard something to that effect before--but he didn't know for sure.

Hugo remembered what the cook had said about his work. Maybe some of this money was something he'd earned directly from customers. If that was true, then the more he worked as a waiter, the more money he would earn.

His wage for the past month and a half couldn't be compared to the allowance he used to receive from his mother: the difference in amount was too stark. But Hugo felt a little better knowing that he'd earned every copper coin, and then some. He was trying not to be prideful, but Hugo still had a sense of his own worth. He was smiling, though he didn't realize it. He was supporting himself now. He could keep living this way, and even improve things for himself a little. He no longer felt like he was lost and stumbling in a futureless darkness.

Ryuan and Yoar had helped him so much. He remembered their faces and said a silent thanks to the both of them for saving his life and caring for him until he could take care of himself.



The tavern boys received a half-day off after collecting their wages. They decided to go out to the stores as a group to see what they could buy. Hugo stayed behind, lingering near the kitchen until it was time for work again.

It was a bright, sunny day. The cooks and their assistants took advantage of the weather to smoke and salt meat, then pack it into

barrels for storage. The cook who had spoken to Hugo before was working with them, so Hugo decided to say hello.

The cook looked up as Hugo approached. "You're here? Why didn't you go out shopping with the others? You could go home, too, if it's in the city."

"I don't have a home," Hugo said. "And I didn't feel like going out." He counted out five copper coins into his hand and held them out to the cook. "Could I ask you to make some food for me? Not a lot; just whatever this amount would pay for."

The cook frowned. He looked at the coins, then at Hugo's face. "Why?"

"There's someone I'd like to thank, and I'd rather do it with good food than just money," he said.

The cook's expression gradually transformed: he was almost smiling. "Ah, I see. So you want to pay for something we make in the kitchen with your wages?"

"Yes, sir."

The cook cleaned his hands in a bowl of fresh water and dried them. He nodded. "Well, if there's someone you're so grateful to that you want to repay them with my cooking, I certainly can't disappoint you--or them. Wait a while and I'll make you some soup from our fresh vegetables."

"Thank you so much!" Hugo bowed.

"How many portions would you like?" the cook asked.

"Two," Hugo said. "A man and his daughter took care of me for a while."

"Only two?" The cook snorted. "You've forgotten to ask for a portion for yourself, you know. I'll make food for three, but you have to help me."

Hugo grinned. "All right!"

The cook worked quickly, but diligently: he prepared the food as carefully as he would have for a paying customer in the tavern. Watching him work was fascinating; Hugo felt like he could stand next to him all day helping and never get bored.

When the soup was done, the cook poured three portions into a large clay pot and covered it so that it wouldn't cool quickly. Making the stew had taken up most of the day: it was almost sunset. Hugo had to work at night, so if he wanted to deliver the soup, he'd have to do it fast.

The cook passed the clay pot to Hugo. Hugo dashed out of the kitchen and ran to Yoar and Ryuan's house. A flock of white birds were perched on the roof of the house, just like they always did around sunset and sunrise. A taramu peeked at Hugo from inside the house and flew toward him, winding playfully around his neck.

Hugo supported the clay pot against his hip for stability, then knocked on the door. Ryuan opened it right away.

"Hugo?" Ryuan asked. There was a taramu around her neck, too.

Ryuan looked concerned. Hugo had run all the way here and was red-faced and out of breath, so maybe she thought that something was wrong. Hugo smiled to put her more at ease. She smiled back.

This was home now, Hugo realized. Now that he was here, he didn't want to go back to work. Ryuan set her hand on his shoulder and said, "Come in, come in!"

Yoar was home from work. He noticed Hugo coming in with Ryuan. "Oh, a visitor?" he asked.

"It's me, Hugo. Can I come in for a while?"

Yoar wiped his hands on an apron, then came closer to the door. He smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Well, I'll be! If it isn't Hugo coming to see us again. You don't need to ask to visit, you know. We're not strangers."

Hugo raised up the clay pot full of soup. "I, uh, brought dinner for us. Can we eat together?"

Ryuan accepted the pot from Hugo. She lifted the lid and smelled it, then looked at Hugo with wide eyes.

Yoar was curious about what Hugo had brought for dinner. "Hm? What's this?" He smelled the soup, then rubbed his hands together. "Excellent! There's meat in there, right? How could you afford something so fine?"

Hugo grinned. "I know one of the cooks in the tavern. He made this for me. I haven't tried it yet, but I'm sure it tastes great!"

Yoar looked between Hugo and the pot, eyes wide. "Did you really come all this way just to have dinner with us?"

Hugo blushed. "Well... I never really got to thank you for helping me before. And I really wanted to, so... Anyway. I know it must have been hard to support me for all that time. So thank you."

There were tears in the corners of Yoar's eyes that didn't fall. "When you put it that way..."

Yoar didn't say anything else. He gripped Hugo's shoulder and pulled him into a brief one-armed hug. He and Ryuan started setting the table for dinner. Hugo offered to help, but Ryuan shook her head. She and her father kept shooting one another excited smiles.

When the table was set, Ryuan, Yoar and Hug sat down and took their first bites of the soup the cook had made for them. "It's delicious!" Yoar exclaimed.

Ryuan nodded. Spoke to Hugo through the taramu. "I've never tasted anything this good before." Ryuan usually ate slowly and a bit disinterestedly, but now, her chopsticks moved so fast that they were practically a blur. She was crying--maybe from happiness, maybe from the spices in the food. Or maybe both.

Hugo smiled, satisfied, and made a mental note to thank the cook again later.

"This is wonderful," Yoar said. "Who cooked this for you? Shigan?"

"Uh, yeah. I think that's his name," Hugo said. "Do you know him? He's tall, kind of fat, and always looks like he's drunk."

Yoar nodded. "Yep, that's the guy. He's well-known for not being able to hold his liquor... but his cooking's reasonably well-known around here. He could do a lot better for himself if he stopped drinking. He doesn't get along too well with others... still, I can't fault his skill at cooking now that I've tasted it for myself."

Hugo frowned. "What do you mean, he could do better for himself?" Hugo had never noticed anything like that at the tavern. "You say that like he's gotten into trouble before, or something."

Yoar waved his hand dismissively. "Let's leave things there for the moment. It could just be talk, for all I know."

Hugo's eyebrows drew together. "What kind of talk?"

Yoar thought for a moment. "Well, I heard that he worked at Rotaru for a long time, or maybe Tomuran. You wouldn't know, but those are some of the most famous restaurants in the city. People knew Shigan by reputation. He was a very famous chef, though that was a long time ago now.

"I don't know exactly what happened, but alcohol was almost certainly involved. He attacked someone in the kitchen and pulled a knife on them. Whatever Shigan did was serious enough to get himself thrown into prison. Mar was an old friend of his from when he was a kid, and he bailed him out and gave him a job at the tavern. I don't know how much bail was, but I'd guess it was a pretty penny. Shigan works in the tavern where you are to pay off that debt."

Yoar ladled himself a second helping of soup. He was about to dig in again, but then he frowned. "Most chefs of Shigan's skill wouldn't be content working for other people. And the man definitely knows his own worth. If he took an interest in you—enough to feed you something like this—then there must be a reason."

There were tears in Yoar's eyes. "I know I'm not your father, but--for you to gain his notice, being so new--that's a reason for you to be proud. I'm proud of you."

Hugo's throat felt tight. He looked down.

Ryuan stood up and crossed the room. There was an old basket that she and Yoar used to store clothes in the corner. She lifted the lid from the basket and plucked out two folded garments. She came back to Hugo and said, "Please change into these."

Hugo's eyes widened in surprise.

"They're dad's, so they're probably a little too big, but they're clean," Ryuan said. "You can go back to the tavern in these, and when you come back, I'll have washed your clothes for you."

Hugo nodded in understanding. Ryuan had prepared the clothes that he'd left the house in the month before. They were caked with sweat and stained all over now. He really should have given some consideration for other clothes before, but he hadn't had any money, and all the tavern boys lived more or less the same way he did. He could have washed his own clothes, but he'd been so busy that he'd never found the time.

Still, he should have washed his own clothes. Looking at Ryuan now, he realized that the main reason he hadn't was that he didn't really know how. It wasn't something he'd done before, and when he'd watched Ryuan do it, she had scrubbed so hard and used an odd tool like a brush. He wasn't sure he could get similar results just by dumping his dirty clothes in well water and rubbing at stains. And he would have to be naked, or close to it, to even wash his own clothes.

Hugo hesitated. Ryuan had done so much for him already; he shouldn't keep relying on her to do his laundry when he was capable of doing it himself.

Ryuan sensed his hesitation. She shook her head and smiled. "Let me do at least this much for you, now that you're not at the house anymore. I made those clothes for you, y'know. If it'll help you, even just a little bit, I don't mind washing a few more clothes."

Hugo looked Ryuan in the eyes, then nodded. He hadn't realized that Ryuan had made the clothes he was wearing especially for him.



Whenever Hugo had a partial day off from work, he used it to go to and visit Ryuan and Yoar. Over time, they got to know one another very well, and there was no more formality or awkwardness between them. Yoar and Ryuan were illiterate, uneducated and desperately poor, but Hugo became as attached to them as the family that he'd lost.

Hugo's speech and mannerisms changed. He mimicked the other tavern boys and lost the accent he'd been raised with. That upset Hugo a little, but it couldn't be helped. He was able to make new friends in the lower city and speak with them easily, without needing to think about how he said something, which made his life easier and more enjoyable. He was often praised at work, and started earning a bit more money.

Once, Hugo called Ryuan his older sister by accident when addressing her. She seemed so happy that he decided to keep calling her that. Yoar could never replace his father, so Hugo started calling him "uncle Yoar," and Yoar didn't object.



Hugo became accustomed to his work and could do it much faster than he'd been capable of at the start. After he finished his assigned work, he was permitted to help serve drinks in the tavern. After his shift, he helped everyone clean up, then went to spend time with Yoar and Ryuan. It was a somewhat punishing schedule, but Hugo always looked forward to getting up in the morning. The work was still hard, but it was getting easier, and he had people that he wanted to see.

Hugo was the son of a noble warrior: his father had been in service to the Mikado himself. Hugo understood that his position in society had fallen considerably, but he didn't consider that much of a loss. He found life in the lower city interesting, and making his own way in the world was unexpectedly satisfying.

One evening when Hugo was on his way back to the tavern after delivering a few things in town, Hugo saw some people working late in their workshop. The sun was nearly set, and the shadows moving across the workers' faces were blue and purple. The workers sat on long benches with their backs to Hugo, but their hands were busy. Hugo decided to take a closer look at what they were doing.

The workers were all inside the workshop, so Hugo spied on them through a window. The benches in the room he was looking at were full. There were kids standing near the door counting something on their fingers. The men working kept their heads down and didn't talk to one another. Hugo had passed by this workshop several times before, but

he'd never been able to figure out what the men and the kids were doing.

At first glance, it looked like the workers sitting at the benches were drawing pictures, but there was no paper in front of them. They painted flat, circular discs different colors with brushes. After the discs dried, another worker placed them all on a tray and carried them to a different part of the workshop that Hugo couldn't see from the window.

What are they doing here, anyway? Hugo's curiosity was piqued. He made a special effort to look at the tray as the cart passed by.

The flat discs were painted clay plates that hadn't been fired yet. Hugo remembered his mother bringing out decorative ceramic plates painted with fancy designs for special occasions. Hugo's heart felt heavy—he was about to cry—but he didn't look away. There was a young man—surely not much older than he was himself—painting a plate. The design was beautiful. The man's brushstrokes were perfectly even. He made the work look easy, but Hugo guessed that it was much more difficult than it looked. The man painted thin, delicate lines atop the colors he'd painted, and the image of a flower emerged by slow degrees. Hugo felt like he was watching a living flower bloom on the plate as the man painted it. It was like magic. The special plates that Hugo's mother had owned must have been made in just this way.

The wind carried the smell of frying fish to Hugo's nose. He heard a mother scolding a disobedient child in a shrill voice some distance away. The child objected to being scolded and yelled at their mother in an indignant tone.

Hugo had lingered here for too long. He turned around and walked back to the main street, hauling an empty jug and boxes back to Mar's tavern.



The spring passed, and it was summer. The canals that had been shut down and blocked off by Talsh were repaired and functional again. Hugo saw many boats traveling the canals, including a number of small ones that didn't appear to be Yogoese in design. The unofficial lockdown imposed on the city ended, and people were permitted to move freely again, though they weren't allowed to leave the city itself.

The very poor in the city stored and sold their own excrement as fertilizer. No one wanted to smell that kind of thing within the city walls, so the people who made their living this way loaded up their fertilizer on boats and shipped it to the Akano Plains, which were just outside Hoshiro. Hugo saw these boats from time to time as he walked along the edge of a canal while running errands for the tavern.

The Akano Plains had not yet recovered from the last terrible battle between the Yogoese and the Talsh the previous winter. The bodies of the Yogoese soldiers had been left to rot, and some were still easily visible. Hugo noticed fresh furrows in the earth and wondered how the farmers managed to work the land with all these dead people cluttering it. He'd never thought much about food production before.

Hugo saw boats leaving the city toward the plains all the time; lately, he'd observed more boats heading into the city, too, along different

canals. Did the food that Hoshiro ate come from these plains? Or from even farther away?

It was likely that many of the soldiers lying dead had been farmers themselves to start with. There'd been forced conscription of the common people at the end of the war. The farmers that remained would be shorthanded when it was time to bring the harvest in. Fathers, uncles, brothers: every family had lost someone, and often more than one person. The farmers that survived were forced into slavery by the Talsh. News of this development wasn't widespread in the city yet, but Hugo expected that it would be soon.

The Talsh had enslaved the farmers. Merchants and those who lived and worked in the city might be next. Sometimes, Hugo heard mothers asking after their sons in the street, or parents calling out the names of their missing daughters, but he never spoke to them. He kept his eyes down and tried not to think about what was happening to the city. Listening to people desperately searching for their families caused him great pain. He couldn't join his family—if there were even any of them left. It was safer for him, and them, if he didn't go looking for them.

There were so many war widows. Seeing them holding hands with their young children and fighting back tears when they heard the news of their husbands' deaths was Hugo's least favorite sight.

By the start of summer, the Yogoese warriors who had survived the last battle in the city had all been captured as prisoners of war. They weren't killed—the rumor was that they'd all been sent somewhere. Maybe that was a lie, but Hugo wanted to think that at least a few of them were still alive.

chapter two

danga doudo



It was unbearably hot that summer. The people who lived in the lower city had no relief from it. Large trees lined the main road through the city. Many people sat in the shade during breaks from work. The summer heat didn't let up until the leaves of those trees turned red and gold with fall colors. The cold winter passed quickly, and then it was spring again.

For Hugo, the whole year had passed in the blink of an eye. He blended into the lower city perfectly now, and was indistinguishable from someone who was born there in terms of his mannerisms, speech, and general knowledge of how to get around. He was so good at his work, and so quick at it, that it bored him. Everything bored him. He felt like he'd learned everything there was to know about Mar's tavern and the lower city.

Hugo felt that there was something lacking in his current life, aside from the obvious. He passed his days in a familiar routine. He didn't suffer, but he wasn't happy. He kept hoping for something to change.

Since he had time, Hugo took up sword training again—with inferior practice weapons, of course—and tried to recall his previous lessons and education. He wrote down what he could remember, daydreaming

about the life he could have had as one of the Mikado's Shields. He knew that it was an impossible daydream, but he was so bored that he didn't have much else to think about.

Things continued that way for a few weeks before Hugo recognized the essential problem: there was no future here. He could stay in the lower city and be safe, but nothing about his circumstances or his life would change, and he couldn't wait for it to change by itself. If he wanted a future for himself, he would have to make one.

All I do is work, eat, and sleep. There has to be something else I can do...

He was so stifled that he wanted to scream... and yet, it felt wrong to complain. He got along well with the other tavern boys now: he talked and joked with them every day. None of them had any dreams of the future, though. They seemed content to stay where they were. Most of them didn't even seem to care that Talsh had taken over Yogo. Yogo didn't exist as its own independent nation anymore: it was just one more conquered province in the vast Talsh Empire.

Hugo did possess a sense of national pride, so the blasé attitude of the other boys confused him. Weren't their families dead, too? Hadn't they suffered? And didn't they remember that? If they did, they never said anything about it. Maybe those experiences were too painful for them to talk about—or maybe they hadn't suffered the same losses Hugo had.



Hugo couldn't serve Talsh soldiers that came to Mar's tavern. Whenever he caught sight of one, he started shaking all over and dashed off to the kitchens so that he could compose himself. Goosebumps rose on his skin. There was so much rage and hatred in him that he couldn't look a Talsh soldier in the eyes. Their close-cropped hair and bronze-colored skin unnerved him. They seemed less like invaders than people from a different world entirely.

If Hugo could master his revulsion, he might be able to serve the Talsh soldiers like the other waiters, keeping his head down so that they wouldn't see his face. He could poison them so easily that way... but then he would be caught. Besides, killing with poison wasn't the way a warrior fought. And killing a few soldiers wouldn't be sufficient to bring down the Talsh Emperor.

Could Hugo even do that? Kill the Talsh Emperor, or at least remove him from power? It seemed possible; history was full of revolts and political uprisings. Hugo wouldn't be able to start a revolution on his own, however. If he truly wanted to bring down the Talsh Emperor, he would need a very good plan and a lot more help.

It was obvious to Hugo that he would need a lot of warriors, for one: he couldn't kill all of his nation's enemies on his own. He could only hope that the prisoners of war that the Talsh had taken were still alive. They were all that was left of Yogo's warriors.

That being the case... Hugo also couldn't help those warriors on his own. Assuming they were alive, the guards around them would be vigilant and numerous. There would be no hope for them to be released at all until Yogo was completely subjugated, and by then, it would be too

late to stage a revolt. Those warriors would be much older men by the time they were free, if they even survived captivity.

Hugo was his father's heir, and the last of his line, so far as he knew. If his life had gone the way he'd thought it would when he was a child, he would have lived, worked, and trained with many other Yogoese warriors, but for now, he had to assume that he was the only free warrior that remained in Yogo.

Only... he didn't *have* to assume that, did he?

Yoar had told him that only ruffians wore leather boots—and that they did so to conceal weapons like knives. There was no law that said properly trained warriors from noble houses were the only people qualified to lead a revolt.

Hugo sighed inwardly. It was a dream, overthrowing the Talsh Empire. It would never happen. If he tried leading a revolt with common soldiers and warriors, they would all be killed, including himself. He saw no way out of his situation except for a swift and merciless death.

Hugo no longer grieved openly for his family, but the loss of them had worn a hole right through him. He felt empty inside: utterly devoid of emotion. His circumstances were too reduced for him to hire an army, and even if he had money, resources, and soldiers, whatever he had wouldn't be enough. Talsh was too big to stop on his own. Accepting that fact broke something in Hugo's soul.

Hugo's clothes were dirty and torn, no matter how much he and Ryuan washed and mended them: his work soiled them quickly. He was always hungry, except after his more satiating dinners shared with

Ryuan and Yoar. He saved as much of his money as he could for a future that might never come to pass.

Money would be useful in any case. No matter what happened, Hugo felt sure he would be able to use it. But he couldn't imagine what he would use it for. In capitulating to Talsh internally, he'd lost his ability to envision goals for his own life.

Hugo also knew that the money he put away wouldn't amount to much. Being a common person meant living hand to mouth, never having enough to stop working or to advance on the social scale. Even if Hugo had concrete goals, he wouldn't be able to achieve them with his meager earnings. He was starting to understand why the tavern boys hadn't felt much of a change when the Talsh took over. Their job and daily life remained more or less the same, and because they were used to it, they didn't feel trapped in this place like Hugo did.

Old Yogo's capital had been destroyed, and the country itself was broken. Hugo felt that keenly, but the rest of the world barely seemed to notice.



Bit by bit, the way of life of the Yogoese people started to change.

Talsh stationed soldiers to keep the peace on the streets, catch thieves, and prevent crime. Women could walk the streets at night alone and not fear any danger. Aru Ma Talsh, "the silence caused by Talsh," became a city neologism.

The Talsh currency, danga, was valued higher than the lugal and gradually replaced it as the most popular currency in use. One silver lugal was worth one copper danga. The disparity between what could be bought with each currency was vast.

The children of the city started calling Talsh money pouches danga doudo. Children who received an allowance often gathered near the patrolling Talsh soldiers to count their money and figure out what it was worth.

The Talsh soldiers that came to Mar's tavern paid and left tips only in danga, of course. The tavern boys and waiters fought over who would serve Yogoese customers and who would serve Talsh ones, since the Talsh tips were always better thanks to the exchange rate. Hugo didn't bother fighting to get Talsh business. Seeing the Talsh soldiers sitting and drinking in the tavern made his skin crawl.

I won't throw my soul away for money. Hugo had lost his warrior's status, but not his pride.

Hugo couldn't stand the idea that his friends didn't share that same pride. It felt like they were missing something vital. Either that, or he was clinging to something that had no meaning. He didn't know what was worse.



Hugo and the other tavern boys usually got off work late at night. Some of the boys rolled a dried, sweet herb named choru into thin tubes with paper. They smoked the rolled herb before they went to sleep.

Hugo watched one of the tavern boys, Tam, holding a choru cigarette between two fingers with his eyes half-closed. He appeared entirely relaxed. Hugo was curious enough about choru to want to try a cigarette, but both the herb and the paper to wrap it in cost money, so he didn't ask Tam for one.

"How much do you think I made today?" Tam asked languidly.

Rai, the youngest of the tavern boys, leaned forward with his hand in the air. Tam's gaze fell on him. "You served that Talsh soldier today, right?" he asked. "How much did he give you?"

Tam smiled, then brought a fistful of copper danga coins out of his breast pocket to show everyone. Even one copper danga was a fortune for a tavern boy; it was worth almost three months' worth of normal wages.

The tavern boys whistled in appreciation. Some were openly sullen and jealous.

A smile played about Tam's lips, but it didn't reach his eyes. He let the coins drop from his fingers. "Every time I get paid by one of them, I think about my older brother. He didn't live to collect the last wages he was owed."

The tavern boys who were whistling their appreciation fell silent. The ones that were jealous before looked sadder now. Romui, the oldest tavern boy, reached out and clasped Tam on the shoulder. "It's not the worst thing, is it?" Romui asked softly. "At least you're getting paid back somehow, for his sake and yours."

"The Talsh spread money around like a plague spreads germs," Tam said. "It doesn't mean much to me, really."

The tavern boys slept tightly packed together in a shared room. There were only two oil censers in the room for heat, even in the middle of winter, so the boys were always competing for a warm spot. Hugo sat in a dark corner alone, looking at Tam. He wasn't going to sleep yet, either. Hugo took in Tam's bitter smile, and he thought that he knew what it meant.

Hugo got to sleep late and woke up just before dawn, exhausted to his bones. His heart was pounding with dread, but he couldn't remember the nightmare that had shocked him out of sleep. Tam was right next to him, still asleep. Hugo listened to the other boys breathing and snoring. Someone was sleep-talking.

If he got up now, he'd wake the other boys. It was still dark outside, so Hugo decided to stay still and wait for a while. He looked up at the ceiling.

Tam's brother was probably recruited to fight in the war. Certainly, Tam wasn't from any sort of military or warrior-class family. Hugo had been living and working with him for almost a year, but he'd never mentioned his brother before today. All of Hugo's conversations with his co-workers were shallow. They joked a lot and poked fun at one another, but they rarely discussed anything serious. Whenever Hugo tried to bring up a more serious topic, he was rebuffed.

Would Tam have talked about his brother yesterday if I wasn't there?

Or maybe the others already knew Tam's history, and Hugo was the outsider. It was a lonely existence, holding his true self out of reach of other people. Hugo was always on high alert, and it seemed like the others sensed that and kept their distance. He missed the friends he'd

had as a child. There were so many sword training partners and social equals that he'd never see again.

Hugo closed his eyes. *Are any of my old friends still alive?* Hugo knew that his family was dead, but what about his friends? Had any of them lived through the Talsh attack on the capital? He remembered the voices of his instructors as they put Hugo and his friends through sword drills and physical training. Those instructors had taught Hugo that Yogo was an ancient nation with a proud military tradition... but that tradition was gone, now, as effectively as if it had been erased.

Hugo had received history lessons and learned about Ten no Kami from white-robed Star Readers from the Imperial Palace, too. It was difficult for Hugo to believe that all of them were dead--gone like they'd never existed at all. Why had Talsh felt the need to eradicate so much of Yogo's history and culture when they took over? Why did Hugo have to be spared? And why was he still here, if there was nothing left for him? How far could Hugo fall from his previous state? Could he keep living this way indefinitely?

Hugo didn't want to think about it all. He had no answers, only questions.

Even though he didn't want to think about what his life had become, there were too many things that he'd failed to think about after his family's death in that terrible fire. The more he tried not to think about them, the more they pushed themselves to the front of his mind. If he kept living this way... it was very likely that he would die as a commoner. He blinked back tears.

If that was the price for living a long life, his mother would want him to pay it... but what about his father? And himself? That wasn't what he wanted.

The faint call of a bird restored Hugo's sense of time and place. The sun was rising; it was time to get up. It was his turn to draw water from the well today, so he should probably start his work earlier than the others. By the time he was done, breakfast would be over; the others wouldn't leave him much to eat, but at least there would be something. Then he would have to clean up to prepare for the tavern opening, and peel vegetables all afternoon.

It was just another day in Hugo's life as a commoner.

But it definitely wasn't what he wanted.

chapter three

narrow strip of sky



It was a hot, sticky summer night. The tavern boys had a holiday—an entire day off—so Hugo and the other tavern boys prepared to visit a public bath. They were about to set out together as a group when the youngest tavern boy, Rai, burst into the room panting for breath.

"Tam's in trouble! He got caught by the guys at Noruan's tavern!"

The other tavern boys all started talking at once.

"What? Where is he?" Romui, the oldest of the tavern boys, used his loud voice to cut through the commotion.

"Behind Rou's warehouse, where they ship in most of the wine we get. We have to save him!" Rai said. He was only eleven years old. His voice shook with fear.

"We will," Romui said. "Noruan's lot will be sorry they messed with the likes of us!" He selected a group of the older tavern boys by tapping them on the shoulder. They were the ones that Romui thought would be useful in a fight. Of course, Hugo was selected; he was the only one who'd ever received proper fight training, as a child of one of the Mikado's Shields. Hugo had only fought in one real battle, but he'd done plenty of sparring and practice fights against boys with similar training as him. He wasn't frightened of a little street scuffle.

Remembering the friends he'd trained with saddened Hugo. He wondered if any of them were still alive. They probably weren't.

Hugo walked along the street with Romui and the other tavern boys with a broken pole in his hand to use as a weapon. Rai followed the fighters, staying a few steps behind. It was getting dark; the shops and houses that they passed by were lighting lamps in their windows. By the time they reached Rou's warehouse, it was so dark that Hugo could scarcely see his companions.

But Hugo and the other tavern boys didn't need to see to find Tam. They could hear choked gasps and the sounds of blows, close and getting closer as they walked. They were right on top of the fight when seven figures came into view. They were all on the ground, and most

were knocked out. Hugo bent down and frowned. There was no street behind the warehouse, only an open space of packed dirt.

That was lucky. The street was stone, and fighting on stone was dangerous; loose rock could be used as a weapon, and falling head-first on a stone surface could easily be fatal. Hugo wanted a real weapon for this fight—he would have given almost anything for his sword—but on a battlefield like this, where the ground was soft, he and the others could probably make do.

Tam was on the ground, still conscious, but he was being kicked by three or four other boys.

"Is that... Dougu?" one of the tavern boys said.

"Shit," Romui said under his breath. "Rai! You didn't tell us that Dougu was here!" He poked Rai roughly in the shoulder.

Rai looked like he was about to cry.

The gang from Noruan's tavern turned away from Tam to face them. "Oi! Look there! It's the soup-for-brains morons from Mar's tavern!" The gang laughed.

One boy from Noruan's tavern stepped away from Tam, hands on hips. "Well, well, well. I was just about getting sick of beating that one to a pulp. Nice of 'em to come to us for their beating, isn't it, lads?" He grinned broadly. "Romui! So you're the leader over at Mar's now, huh? Seems you didn't get the news! Dougu dropped by our tavern a few days ago and agreed to join up."

Romui glared, angered at being taunted, and lifted his pole over his shoulder.

Dougu stood still, watching Romui approach. He looked bored.

Romui brought his pole down squarely over Dougu's head, but he dodged with astonishing speed and slammed Romui in the cheek with his fist. Romui stepped back, eyes wide and burning with rage.

The gang from Noruan's tavern egged Dougu on with loud cheers.

Romui wanted to fight, but he was outclassed. Hugo turned to Shouya, the boy standing next to him, and whispered in his ear. "Hey, hand me that rag you've got over your shoulder."

"Eh?" Shouya frowned in incomprehension, but he passed Hugo the rag. "What are you gonna do with it?" he whispered back.

"I'll take care of him." The other tavern boys clumped around Hugo. He spoke quietly. "I'll put Dougu down, but you have to promise not to say my name out loud. Got it?"

Shouya and the other tavern boys nodded, though it didn't look like they understood his intentions.

Hugo didn't pause to explain himself. He wrapped his left fist in the rag and called out, "Hey you!"

Dougu looked up.

Hugo ran at Dougu, aiming a sharp kick to the back of his knee. The kick connected, making Dougu's leg go out from under him; he aimed his fist, hard like stone, at Hugo's face.

Hugo stopped the blow with his own arm and felt Dougu's strength radiating up and down, making his bones rattle. A shock went through Hugo's entire body. Instead of backing down, Hugo smiled, and there

was something a little crazy in it; a little wild. He jabbed his fist out and felt it in his fingers when Dougu's nose broke. Dougu pitched forward, and Hugo shoved his knee up into Dougu's chin.

Dougu brought one arm up to protect his face and struck out wildly at Hugo with his other hand. Dougu was tough, but he didn't really know how to fight any more than the other boys did; Hugo could see what he was planning to do well before he moved.

Hugo slammed Dougu in the gut with his wrapped fist and knocked the wind out of him. Dougu fell, curling in on himself in pain. Blood streamed from his broken nose. The leg Hugo had kicked was bent at an unnatural angle.

The other members of the gang from Noruan's tavern were dumbstruck.

The tavern boys from Mars were cheering. "Wow! That was amazing, Hu—"

Hugo spun on his heel and yelled, "Shut up!"

The other tavern boys snapped their mouths shut.

It was a warm night. Hugo hadn't noticed during the fight, but he had sweat in his eyes. He started feeling sluggish as the adrenaline wore off. He faced down the gang from Noruan's tavern and set his shoulders. "Y'all never give us any trouble again, y'hear? Or I'll wipe the floor with the rest of ya."

Hugo focused his attention on Dougu. "That goes double for you." His tone was sharp and cold like ice. "Do I make myself clear?"

The gang from Noruan's tavern was cowed. They nodded rapidly and dashed off into the darkness.

Hugo's knee hurt a little where it had contacted Dougu's chin. It was stiff and hard to move. Hugo walked carefully over to Tam, giving himself mental reminders to check the injury more thoroughly when he and the other tavern boys got back to Mar's. There were fresh bruises forming on Tam's face, but he'd hunched in to protect himself while he was being beaten, so the damage wasn't as bad as it could have been.

"Tam? Hey, are you okay? Can you stand?" Hugo asked.

Tam gritted his teeth. He was holding onto his knees. He recognized Hugo's voice and nodded with effort. Romui helped support Tam, and the tavern boys went back to Mar's tavern together. The other boys were concerned about Romui's and Tam's injuries, but they didn't complain much. The others kept sneaking surreptitious glances at Hugo, looking like they wanted to say something to him.

Hugo sighed. "What is it? Why are you staring at me?"

Shouya, who'd given him the rag to use in the fight, spoke first, and haltingly. "It's just... that was amazing, Hugo. I had no idea you were that good at fighting."

Shouya and the boys were looking at Hugo with genuine respect in their eyes. That might have made Hugo happy a long time ago, but now, it just made him uncomfortable. He knew how to fight barehanded, but it wasn't his preferred style; he feared that he might be drawn into more fights of that kind in the future. His voice was quiet when he said, "It was nothing, really. In all honesty, I hate fighting more than almost anything. I'd, uh, like to ask you something."

The other boys nodded.

"I don't want to get caught up in more fights like this. If you'd have said my name, the gang from Noruan's tavern would know who I am, and I didn't want that. You get it, right?"

The boys nodded again.

"So don't tell anyone that I was involved in that fight. Let Romui and Tam take the credit for beating Dougu. I don't want it." There was something threatening in Hugo's tone that made the other boys afraid.

Rai, who was the youngest, stepped forward to say, "I get it, but... I mean, that was amazing! If someone asks me about it, I might wind up saying your name by mistake."

Hugo smiled. Rai was so young, and so honest. "You can tell people what happened. Just tell people that you don't know what my name is. That's the only thing you need to do. Say that if you told them, you'd have to kill them. If they keep giving you a hard time, tell me who they are and I'll take care of them, too, just like I did Dougu."

Rai swallowed heavily. "You won't kill them, will you?"

Hugo laughed. "Nah. I'll just hurt 'em so bad that they'll wish they were dead."

Rai and the other tavern boys exchanged faint smiles. Hugo saw a bit of fear there, still, but most of them seemed glad that Hugo was going to protect them from other threats like Dougu if the need arose.

Hugo's entire life changed as a consequence of that night's fight. His name wasn't widely known, but other taverns learned what had happened and sent their own strong fighters to test him. Dougu had

possessed quite a reputation in the lower city, so a number of challengers showed up to fight Hugo for the sole purpose of learning his name. Hugo tried refusing to fight, but he had to protect the other tavern boys and frequently got caught up in violent scuffles. Over time, he got used to it--the fighting, and the praise of the other tavern boys. It even started being a little fun.

Curiosity over Hugo's name grew, like an ember sparking a fire to life. The tavern boys at Mar's kept Hugo's name secret. Challengers kept coming--and not just for Hugo. His name still wasn't known, but everyone knew that the boy who'd defeated Dougu worked at Mar's tavern.



Midsummer in the lower city was hot, sticky and unpleasant. Hugo was raised in a noble estate that was manned by servants carrying fans to circulate the air; he wasn't used to trying to breathe in such conditions. When he was done with work, he had no desire to go anywhere. He plopped down in front of the well behind the tavern and drew up water by the bucketful, gulping it down until his thirst was slaked and pouring more water down his neck.

Even the nighttime was too hot. Hugo looked up at the sky as the stars came out in the clear evening sky and cursed the summer season. The city was quieting down before the evening rush; Hugo heard people walking past the tavern and the incessant buzzing of mosquitoes. All was still; he was alone. There had been no challengers

for him at the tavern today, and he was glad; he felt too heat sick to fight.

Hugo's mood was dampened for another reason as well. He'd listened to the gossip in the tavern that day and learned that the last remnants of Yogoese resistance were dead, fled, or integrated into the Talsh Empire's army. Hugo didn't understand the warriors who'd capitulated. The gossipers claimed that the Yogoese soldiers and warriors were too tired to keep fighting. Hugo felt like he'd been abandoned. It was impossible for Yogo to throw off Talsh rule now, when there were no warriors left to revolt. He would never follow in his father's footsteps as one of the Mikado's Shields.

Hugo remembered something his father had said to him long ago.

"Warriors are people who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of other people. The Mikado, who is blessed by Ten no Kami, is responsible for keeping our nation stable and peaceful, so that the people can live well. You'll be one of the Mikado's Shields one day, Hugo. You will sacrifice yourself in service to the Mikado, so that the people of Yogo can live in peace. That is your destiny."

At the time, Hugo had trusted his father's words completely. He'd felt like he could see Ten no Kami's hand guiding the path of his young life. He still wanted to do what his father said. He was willing to give up everything so that the people of Yogo could flourish, but he couldn't see Ten no Kami's guiding hand anymore. He sat in the gathering darkness by the well all alone, watching the narrow strip of sky overhead like he was expecting some kind of sign.

Hugo couldn't live in occupied Yogo as a warrior. He'd never considered giving up his dreams of rising up against Talsh before, but now, he realized that he had to. He wasn't strong enough to defend the Mikado and protect the people's happiness, and he never would be. If he was going to survive, he had to choose another path.

Hugo gritted his teeth and rubbed his stiff jaw. His clothes were sweaty, dirty, and torn. Hugo should be used to that, but in this moment, Hugo felt the tragedy of his own situation. He hadn't felt so hopeless since he'd run away from the burning warehouse and lost his family forever.

The tavern started burning lanterns that had chemicals in them to repel mosquitoes. Hugo put his face in his hands.

This is hopeless, I'm hopeless.

He'd told the other tavern boys not to say his name and to pretend they didn't know it. There was irony in that, almost humorous; Hugo couldn't live under his own name and identity anymore. What was the point of living at all? Hugo no longer felt like protecting himself. His life was over. Whatever came next didn't matter.

chapter four

madness



The atmosphere was so thick with moisture that it felt oily. Hugo was squatting down in the corner of the tavern on a break, dozing fitfully because he was too exhausted to move. He'd finished cleaning up and getting the tavern ready to open and had nothing else to do until it was time to start cooking and bringing out barrels of drink from storage.

The other tavern boys were outside in the street, playing mokko, a betting game. Hugo could hear them, but their voices seemed far away. Hugo wondered if he'd caught a cold or something. The inside of his head was all stuffed up. He leaned his weight heavily against the wall and tried to sleep.

A sharp cry from outside roused Hugo. He stood up and glanced out the door at the tavern boys, checking to make sure they were all right.

A few of them called out to Hugo, their voices urgent. "Hugo! Hugo! Come here!"

Hugo stood up straight, stretched, and went out the back door into the street to join the others. All the tavern boys started talking at once.

"Hugo! You have to help Rai! He's--"

"Where is Rai?" Hugo asked. He didn't see the boy anywhere.

The other boys gasped and faced the door Hugo had just come through. Hugo turned, too, and saw Rai being held up unconscious between two other boys.

Hugo frowned and dashed up to Rai. He couldn't tell everything that had happened at a glance, but it looked like Rai had been severely beaten. He was so young and so little. His face was misshapen with bruises. There might be worse damage to his body as well.

"Hold his head and put him down," Hugo said. "Don't jostle him." He looked at the other tavern boys with something fearful in his eyes.

"Tam, bring me fresh water!" Hugo called out. "Yugi, I need clean rags! Put down a drop cloth inside and we'll let Rai rest there."

The tavern boys nodded and dashed off in all directions to fetch things to help Rai.

"Romui." Hugo faced the oldest tavern boy. "Sorry to ask, but Rai needs medicine. Can you go to Shigan's and buy some? I'll cover half the cost."

"Sure. I'll be right back." Romui left, his steps echoing down the long hallway that led to the front doors of the tavern.

Hugo directed the other boys to carry Rai carefully to the drop cloth set out near the kitchen. It was important to protect his head from more damage. He was still unconscious, and that concerned Hugo more than his other injuries.

Then Rai opened his eyes. His breathing came shallowly through his broken nose. He made a sound like he wanted to say something, but

Hugo didn't hear any words.

Hugo brought his ear close to Rai's mouth and whispered. "Rai, what is it? What happened?"

"I... said your name." Rai gasped painfully. "I'm sorry."

Hugo's eyes widened slightly. A chill went through his entire body. Rai's face was pale: drained of blood. He was only eleven years old. Hugo couldn't imagine who wanted to know his name so badly that they'd beat an innocent child half to death.

The chill passed through Hugo and became heat: the flame of rage. He clenched his jaw, then pushed the sweaty hair off Rai's forehead gently. "Don't apologize, Rai. I should be apologizing to you. You should have never suffered like this."

The other tavern boys gathered around them, looking between Hugo and Rai with expressions of curiosity and fear.

"This is my fault." Hugo pitched his voice for the whole room to hear. "I'm sorry. This is all my fault."

Hugo couldn't tell what the other tavern boys thought of that. They remained silent when Hugo bowed his head and got on his knees in a posture of supplication or prayer.

Tam approached, carrying water in a bucket. Yugi, bringing rags, stopped still when he saw Hugo bowing. Slowly, Hugo raised his head and accepted the rags and water, then directed his full attention to Rai.

Hugo dipped a clean rag in cool water and dabbed at the injuries on Rai's face. Some of them were still bleeding. The other boys stood around and watched. The silence was oppressive and forbade speech.

Romui came back with medicine. Hugo bent down and whispered in Rai's ear, "We'll boil some migu root for you now and make a tea. Drink it all. It will help you sleep. I'll do your work for you tonight, so don't worry, okay?"

Rai nodded shallowly, then winced. He shifted uncomfortably on the drop cloth, then whispered, "Himi."

"What?" Hugo asked.

"Himi. That's who beat me up."

Hugo nodded in understanding. "Sleep now. I'll make sure he never hurts you again; I promise."

Rai sighed and closed his eyes. Hugo stood up, then went down the hall and waved to Romui.

"Do you know a guy named Himi?" Hugo asked.

"Yeah," Romui said. "He leads the tavern boys over at Dangi's. He's a big guy, and has a reputation like yours--no one who challenges him ever wins. He goes around pickin' fights, though."

Hugo thanked Romui tersely for the information, then turned his back on him. He slipped on his straw sandals and went out into the hot midsummer night, posture straight and movements quick with purpose.

Romui called out to him before he left the yard. Hugo didn't turn. It was sunset, and the red light shone on the stone street and cut into Hugo's eyes.

"I know you're strong as shit, but you're not honest," Romui said quietly. "You should tell us the truth, even if you don't tell anyone else."

Hugo tilted his head.

"Well... maybe you'll come back after fighting Himi. You can talk to us again then."

"What do you mean 'maybe I'll come back?'"

"I mean that Himi is the leader of the Dangi tavern boys. If you defeat him, you'll be angering them all, and they'll certainly be after revenge."

Hugo's eyes narrowed. "I see. Thanks for the warning, Romui."

"There's no need to thank me."

"There is. I haven't been considering my own safety up to this point. I can't protect all of you all the time, and I can't be expected to keep fighting like I've been forever. When I come back, I'll keep thinking on a solution."

Romui nodded.

Hugo kept thinking. He hadn't heard of Himi before. "Romui, do you know Himi or any of the other boys from Dangi's tavern?"

"Only by reputation," Romui said. "But I think one of us has a cousin who works at Dangi's."

Yugi was sitting in the corner near Rai; he raised his hand. "I do. My cousin's worked there for a while."

Hugo faced Yugi. "Do you get along well with your cousin?"

Yugi hesitated, but then he nodded. "Uh, yeah. He's older than me, and he's always nicer to me than my older brother is."

Hugo grinned widely. "I see. That's good to hear."

"It is?" Yugi asked. "Why?"

"Because we can use him to our advantage."

Yugi frowned, either not understanding or understanding too well that Hugo intended to use Yugi's connection to Dangi's tavern.

"Listen everyone," Hugo said. "I'll handle Himi, and everyone else who tries to give us a hard time. By the time I'm done with them, they'll never bother us again."

Hugo faced Romui again. "I won't let anyone take revenge on us. I'll take it all on myself. Trust me."

Romui and the other tavern boys said nothing, but Romui didn't quite meet his eyes.



Twelve days later, Hugo met Himi in a wooded area near a canal on the outskirts of the city. It was evening, but the sky was as clear as glass, and Hugo could see perfectly well. It had rained for much of the past few days. There was still a slight mist covering the muddy ground.

Himi stood there in the trees, holding a broken pole as a weapon. Dangi's tavern boys stood behind him. Himi couldn't have been any older than sixteen, but he was as big and stocky as most grown men.

His body shape reminded Hugo of the wine barrels he rolled around at Mar's tavern. There was a mean look in his eyes, but no spark of intelligence. His expression barely shifted when he caught sight of Hugo. Hugo could feel Himi underestimating him even from this distance.

Hugo had done as much research as he could on Himi over the past twelve days. Yugi's cousin had said that Himi fought just for the hell of it, just because he could--he never needed a reason. Consequently, Himi was constantly fighting. He was experienced... but his experience was mostly against people who couldn't fight, or didn't want to.

Himi wasn't sharp and scrappy like Dougu had been. Dougu's mind in Himi's body would be capable of winning almost any one-on-one fight. Hugo imagined that the many people who'd fought Himi before struggled most with his bulk--being hit squarely even once by his huge fists or thick legs would mean the end of the fight.

Hugo thought Himi looked a bit foreign, but not Talsh: not anything he could recognize. Body like a barrel, mind like a wild dog, attacking when provoked. He fixed Hugo with a grin of anticipation, showing a few missing teeth. Hugo felt vaguely nauseated.

Himi had beaten Rai almost to death, so that his face was unrecognizable. Hugo felt the desire to mutilate Himi's face in turn, so that he would know how Rai felt.

If I kill Himi, no one will mourn the loss. The world would be better off without him.

That thought gave Hugo courage. Even Yugi's cousin, who was nominally protected by Himi, hated him so much that he shook

whenever he'd spoken of him to Hugo. Dangi's tavern boys lived in fear of Himi, just like everyone else.

Killing him would be going too far, but I'm not sure any amount of pain could teach him a lesson. His comrades won't avenge him. They might even thank me.

Hugo knew that he could beat Himi, but he didn't know what to do with him after he was beaten. He'd started researching Himi with a biased view, believing him to be a waste of a human being, and everything he'd discovered had confirmed his bias. That didn't mean that Hugo was completely right about everything, but he felt he owed it to Rai to really teach Himi a lesson.

In researching Himi and his habits, Hugo had also learned something about himself. If Hugo didn't put Himi down now, he would almost certainly lose his life in another pointless fight. Whether Hugo should be the one to kill Himi was another question, but someone would do it, sooner or later.

It started raining again, and the mist at Hugo's feet was like a fog. He could still see Himi and the tavern boys standing behind him. They were looking at Hugo like they were scared of him. Hugo didn't turn, but he expected that the boys from Mar's tavern were staring back--possibly with equal expressions of fear. Fights were like that: swift, uncertain things, and the anticipation of who would win felt more like anxiety than excitement.

The world around Hugo retreated; he felt like Himi was getting farther away from him. Hugo took a step forward to close the distance and only then heard the rain falling gently around him.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Himi asked in a tone of contempt.

Hugo smiled. "I like to remember my opponents' faces. Do you know mine?"

Himi frowned sourly. "You're Hugo. I don't need to remember nothin' more'n that." He returned Hugo's smile; his lips were so thin, and the corners so pointed, that the smile looked like it was doing violence to his own face. "You're so tiny. What a waste of time."

Hugo shrugged. "I could say the same. I don't waste my time on colossal idiots like you. I know all about you, y'see. Rumor is you're the leader of Dangi's tavern boys by virtue of brute strength, but even your own side hates you. I've heard you steal money from the other boys at Dangi's. What a shitty thing to do." He cracked his knuckles.

For a split second, Himi paled. Hugo had, at least managed to surprise him. He snorted, pretending nonchalance, but Hugo's words had definitely affected him. He waved his pole over his head and assumed a threatening stance.

Hugo stepped lightly around Himi as he struck out again with the pole and punched him the gut, making him double over with a grunt. Punching him felt like punching a solid wooden board, but Hugo didn't flinch. Pain lanced up through his fingers to his arm. If Hugo hadn't wrapped his fists before this fight, it was possible that he would have broken something in his hand.

Himi straightened up and took a step back. "Is that all you got? Felt like a mosquito bite or somethin'." He threw down his weapon and spread his arms out wide. "Come on, then. Hit me. Give it your best shot."

Hugo felt his awareness of his surroundings constrict so that all he could see was Himi challenging him--Himi underestimating him, just like he'd thought he would. But Hugo was also surprised at Himi's toughness. This fight demanded his full attention and concentration. He slowed his breathing, focused all of his energy and took a running start at Himi.

Himi kept smiling--he was looking at Hugo's hands--but Hugo used his momentum to pivot on his front leg and kick with his back leg for maximum power. Him barely reacted--not at first--but then he shifted a little to the side. Hugo had targeted the front of his knee--a weak point on anyone--and even Himi, tough as he was, could feel that something was wrong.

Hugo heard and felt Himi's leg break under his own heel. Snarling, Himi reached out to grab Hugo by the hair and crush his face into the ground, but Hugo avoided being caught. Himi reeled him in by grasping his clothes and pulling; Hugo headbutted Himi to get free.

Himi's nose broke, too. Hugo felt the sickening snap of bone against his skull. Himi's teeth clacked together as blood started streaming from his nostrils.

Himi grabbed Hugo by the throat.

Hugo reacted instantly, twisting out of Himi's hold before he could apply any pressure with his fat fingers. He elbowed Himi sharply in the chest and darted backwards. Himi grunted; his left hand let go. Hugo punched him in his already broken nose with a casual motion, as if he were knocking on a door. Himi went tripping backwards with his mouth open, teeth coated in his own blood.

Hugo hunched forward and wiped his eyes: there was blood in them, so he couldn't see. He stumbled forward over the muddy ground and aimed another kick at Himi's right knee while he was down.

Both of Himi's knees were now broken. He tried to rise, but he couldn't. Hugo kept kicking at Himi with his blood pounding loudly in his ears. He could kick Himi in the ears--violently rupturing the eardrum could be fatal. Hugo brought his heel down heavily against Himi's ear, knowing what might happen, but he couldn't stop himself. He was moving on instinct. He felt like he'd gone mad, like a wild and rabid beast.

Hugo's body felt like it was on fire. Suddenly, someone seized his arms and pulled them behind his back. Romui was shouting at him to stop. Whatever force had been animating Hugo stopped exerting influence over him. He stopped, and didn't struggle against Romui's hold.

Out of breath and covered in blood, Hugo recovered from fear, pain and adrenaline. Himi was unconscious, but he wasn't dead. He was on the muddy ground, lying still.

Romui let Hugo go. Hugo approached Himi slowly and bent down to take a closer look. He could still feel where Himi's fingers had dug into the soft skin of his neck. Himi wasn't moving, but he was breathing. Hugo noticed that his wallet was tied to his belt. With trembling fingers, Hugo untied the wallet from the belt. Then he approached the boys from Dangi's tavern. They didn't run, though some of them appeared terrified.

Hugo stopped in front of Yugi's cousin and held out the wallet. "Take your fair share from here," he said.

None of the boys took any of the money. Yugi's cousin looked at the muddy ground. "Himi always said that he was our leader and would protect us. That's why he takes our money... but what kind of leader steals from his friends?"

Hugo set Himi's wallet on the ground in front of Dangi's tavern boys, then turned away. The tavern boys checked on Himi to make sure he was still alive and seemed relieved when he was.

When Himi recovered from being knocked out, he sat up suddenly and pulled out a dagger from one of his high leather boots. He lunged at Hugo and stabbed him in the side.

Shooting pain lanced up Hugo's body, but he barely noticed. He grabbed Himi's elbow and twisted, hearing the joint pop before the bone broke.

Himi screamed and fell again, but Hugo didn't stop attacking. Himi's grip on his weapon loosened as he fell, and Hugo kicked it out of his hand sharply. He grabbed the knife before it skittered away and stabbed Himi through the hand.

More screams; more blood. Hugo pulled the knife free and kept stabbing like he wanted to cut Himi open to see what was inside. Hugo didn't know what he was feeling: it was dark and bottomless like a void demanding to be filled, and the only thing that could fill it was more violence. He felt more than heard Himi's screams cut off suddenly; Himi would never scream again.

Hugo stood over Himi's body, bleeding but standing tall. The void in his heart was also in his eyes.

part three

ruffian



chapter one

leather boots and a dagger



Hugo felt something winding around his neck, but it didn't hurt. A taramu? He hadn't seen one of those since his last visit to Yoar and Ryuan's house.

The other tavern boys noticed that Hugo had stopped and asked him what was wrong. They were on a wide, well-kept street back to Mar's tavern. Hugo looked around and saw Ryuan standing at the side of the road.

"Go back before me," Hugo said. "There's someone that I have to meet."

"You can't stay here alone at this time of night! It's not safe. This is Dauran territory. If they notice you're alone, they might attack."

"I'll be fine. Just go," Hugo said.

The other tavern boys exchanged uncomfortable glances, but they did as Hugo said and soon vanished in the surrounding dark. Hugo waited until he couldn't see the other tavern boys anymore, then

crossed the street to Ryuan. The night breeze fluttered his hair as he walked.

It had been four years since Ryuan had saved Hugo on the night of the city's terrible battle. He hadn't seen Ryuan in quite a long time, and her sense of otherness--of being different from most people--was readily apparent to him. Her eyes stared right through him like she could see all the way to his spirit.

Ryuan was of an age to marry and have children, but she kept her hair long and loose, in the style of unwed girls. But she looked her age, so a few people gave her curious looks as they passed her by. She smiled at Hugo, but it wasn't quite a natural smile.

Ryuan had caught sight of Hugo well before he'd seen her. She'd never met any of the boys from Mar's tavern before, so she stared at them openly, wishing she could speak to them. She recognized Hugo, of course, though he had his adult height and his black hair was much longer than it had been the last time she'd seen him. There was also something else that was different about him; something subtle that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Ryuan sent the taramu around her neck over to Hugo to verify that she was looking at the right person. He moved quickly, but there was a certain rigidity to his movements, as if he were hurt. He was too thin, almost gaunt; his facial features were as sharp as a blade.

Hugo hadn't visited in a long time, but Ryuan knew at least a little of what he'd been doing--both inside and outside of the tavern--from rumors.

"Ryuan! It's been awhile." Hugo's voice had dropped; it was completely different from his child voice.

"It has." Ryuan spoke through the taramu. "I wasn't sure it was you. I was surprised to see you. You've changed... a lot."

Hugo laughed. "I suppose I have. You've probably heard people talking about me beating people up and things like that. Well, they tried to beat me up first, but I guess it doesn't really matter. I guess I've become a ruffian, like your dad said. I bought myself a good pair of leather boots to hide a dagger in."

Ryuan's expression was very serious, and there was something sad in it. "Where are you staying now? The tavern?" she asked. "Hugo, where are you staying now? I heard you quit your job at the tavern."

"Yeah, I did. About six months ago now."

Ryuan looked like she wanted to say something else, but she remained silent. Hugo remembered bringing her and Yoar the feast of soup from the tavern kitchen and felt a pang of loss. That wasn't something they'd ever do again.

Ryuan's lips trembled. She looked like she was about to cry—like she'd guessed everything that had happened to him over the past six months.

"Ryuan, it's okay," Hugo said. "You're right; I've changed. That's why I never told you that I quit. I didn't want to cause you or Yoar any more trouble."

"You wouldn't cause us any trouble at all," Ryuan said. "The Talsh stopped looking for you a long time ago."

Hugo's lips twitched upward in a slight smile. "It's not the Talsh I'm worried about. There are a lot of people around that want me dead. I'd rather not bring them to your door."

Ryuan flinched. Like Hugo thought, she had heard the rumors. Hugo had become the leader of a gang in the lower city, and more young men were joining it all the time.

"How did your life get so dangerous? Is it something you chose?"

Hugo shrugged. "Yes and no. I didn't want this to happen, but it did." He walked closer to Ryuan and spoke quieter. "Besides, I'm used to it now. If I'm honest, it's actually getting a little boring. So don't worry about me. I'm not in danger.

"But I am bored," Hugo practically spat. "I feel like I know everything there is to know about the lower city. It's only a matter of time before I control what happens here." His eyes were lightless: dark as pits. "I already have the western half under my thumb. It's only a matter of time before the east is mine, too."

Hugo snorted, then leaned against the wall of a store near where Ryuan was standing. He looked up at the starry sky. "Even taking over the other gangs is boring. It's too easy, but I don't know what else to do."

"Couldn't you work? Do something for a living?" Ryuan asked.

"I am working. I'm at Tomuran's now."

"Tomuran's? You mean that big, fancy restaurant?"

"That's the one, yep."

Tomuran's restaurant wasn't in the lower city. It was in the heart of the capital and received only wealthy customers: merchants, warriors and nobles mostly.

"Tomuran and his son don't get along. His kid doesn't do anything right, so the old guy relies on me. I help keep the place running and keep it safe. His son doesn't like that, of course, but now he dumps his work on me, too." He laughed. "You look surprised. Didn't think a street ruffian could work an honest job, too? The pay's a lot better there, and I get a lot more time off."

Hugo smiled again, but there was a bitter undercurrent to it. "Tomuran pays our fees for us, too. So that we won't be conscripted into the army."

The Talsh had started recruiting Yogo's young men into their armed forces that year. Those who could pay a high fee were able to avoid conscription. Romui and Tam had only recently been recruited. They'd never make enough money to pay a fee that high at Mar's tavern.

No one fought the fees. Families had to choose which sons they could afford fees for and which should stay home. Once again, Hugo was depressed at just how easily his homeland capitulated to Talsh demands. The poor were affected the most, of course. The fee for avoiding conscription was so high that paying it would prevent most people in the lower city from being able to buy food. The city was still suffering from famine, and food was expensive everywhere. Families sacrificed their sons to the army so that the rest of them could hold on to bare survival.

Before the Talsh came, the people of the lower city were poor, but they were able to help one another ease their burden. Now Talsh was coming to take their most able-bodied workers and helpers. Life in the lower city was going from bad to worse.

A bell rung the hour. Food stalls along the street were packing up after the dinner rush. Hugo looked into Ryuan's reddish-brown eyes. "Where are you headed now?"

"Home. Where else?"

"I'd ask you over, but my part of town isn't the safest. Are you all right to get back to your house on your own?"

"I can go alone." Her expression was lonely, but she didn't put her emotions into words.

"All right. See ya around." The taramu unwound from around Hugo's neck. His neck felt colder without it there.

Ryuan paused. It seemed like she wanted to say more, but ultimately, she turned around and started walking back to her and Yoar's house.

Hugo sighed, put his back to Ryuan and kept going to where he was headed. He didn't really pay attention to where he was going. By the time he realized he was lost, he was standing in the middle of a group of people, all closely pressed together.

Suddenly, Hugo felt the tip of a knife pressing against the small of his back.

"Where are your friends?" The man threatening him was young—possibly younger than Hugo was himself.

Hugo was still in Dauran territory. The Dauran gang was made up of wealthier criminals; the Dauran factory in the city produced woven silk clothing and bedding. There were four other men surrounding Hugo in addition to the one threatening him with a knife.

"Come along with us now," the knife-wielder said.

They were close to a wider canal. Hugo saw a boat moored to a post with a small warehouse next to it on the other side of the street. They probably wanted to fight Hugo behind the warehouse, where they were unlikely to be interrupted. Hugo shrugged. He felt a chill go up his back, but he held himself rigid. He pretended to be calm and found that it didn't take much acting.

Hugo nodded, then walked toward the warehouse. His would-be attackers followed him closely. When they were out of sight of most people, Hugo grabbed the knife out of his attacker's hand and stomped on his foot so hard that something cracked.

The man screamed and stumbled backwards. Another started chasing after Hugo and ran right into his fist, knocking him out cold. Hugo kept running, weaving his way through the narrow roads between tall buildings. One of his pursuers managed to cut him off; he smiled at Hugo from the shadow of a wall.

Hugo slammed the man in the cheek with his fist, and he went down. There should only be two more. He might have lost them already. He didn't see them in the street, but they might be hiding somewhere, waiting to ambush him. If Hugo could get to a more populated area on the other side of the canal, he might be able to get lost in the crowd.

He was about to cross the street toward the canal when he halted. His two remaining pursuers were there, along with two others. Ryuan was in the center of them, being dragged along by the arms.

"Stop struggling, girl. You should know that talking to that one would make you a target," one of the men said.

Then the men saw Hugo. His vision went red with rage and a desire to kill. The young men noticed his expression and gave him mocking grins.

Hugo didn't look at Ryuan's face; he had no reassurance to offer her. The odds didn't look good, and starting a fight here, in a somewhat crowded street, might not end well for Hugo or his attackers if the patrolling Talsh soldiers caught them at it. He hated himself for getting Ryuan caught up in all of this.

"Let her go." Hugo took a few steps closer to the men. "She's got nothing to do with this. Let her go and I'll follow you wherever you want to take me. If you don't, I'll kill all of you where you stand."

The men made no move to release Ryuan, so Hugo freed his knife from his boot with his left hand and yanked in the nearest man by the hair with his right. He pulled the man forward so that the tip of his knife rested against his stomach.

The other three men closed ranks around Ryuan. "Oi! Let Tagun go, or we'll kill her!"

The men weren't threatening Ryuan with weapons. They were still focused on him. Hugo guessed that they weren't used to killing people. He could still save Ryuan.

"Oi, you there! The guards are coming! Break it up!"

There was another man standing in the street. He had the look of a merchant, but he was armed, and his voice carried the ring of authority. The three boys flinched at the word "guards" and let Ryuan go. They ran up the street without giving Hugo so much as a backward glance. Hugo released his captive and kicked him away. He, too, took off running.

If the other man hadn't called out at just that moment, it was likely that Hugo would have killed all four of them. He waited until he couldn't see any of them anymore, then rushed to Ryuan.

"Are you okay?" Hugo asked. "Are you hurt?"

The taramu around her neck didn't move to Hugo's. She remained mute, crouched down and staring up at him with terror in her eyes.

Hugo extended both arms to help her to her feet. "I'm sorry." He didn't know what else to say.

The guards were visible in the street, talking to one another. Ryuan managed to take a step back from Hugo. She was trembling slightly. She stood up straight and folded her arms to prevent them from shaking.

"Are you hurt?" Hugo repeated. "Do you need help?"

Ryuan shook her head.

The man who'd called out was still in the street. Hugo bowed his head. "Thank you!" he said.

The man looked Hugo over in puzzlement. He came closer to Hugo and Ryuan. He was thirty years old, but his sunburned, weather-beaten

skin made him appear older. He wasn't Yogoese. By his clothes, Hugo guessed that he came from the west, from Orm or Horam or other such places. From a distance he appeared to be nothing more than a simple merchant, but his eyes were sharp and he carried himself like a fighter.

Hugo was still holding his knife. The man's eyes flicked to it, and Hugo sheathed it quickly inside his boot.

"You don't look like a commoner," the man said. He smiled. "You weren't going to win that fight. You hesitated."

Hugo shrugged. "I didn't care if I won. I just wanted to save..." he trailed off. "Besides, it doesn't matter now. Thanks for the warning. No one wants to be hauled off by the guards."

The man's smile deepened. "Truer words were never spoken. I have my own reasons for not wanting to attract the guards' attention." He bowed politely to Ryuan and set his hand gently on her shoulder. She nodded, and he escorted her across the street.

"Uh... could I ask a favor?" Hugo asked.

"Another, young man?"

"Just... Can you make sure she gets home all right?"

"Sure. I've got some time today." He turned to Ryuan. "Let's get you home, miss."

Ryuan looked to Hugo mutely. She couldn't speak to give directions.

"It's in the Mayaru neighborhood, next to the canal," Hugo said. "She knows the way. I'll follow you at a distance for a little while to make sure no one else shows up to cause trouble. Thanks again for your help."

Hugo pulled some money out of his breast pocket and offered it to the man.

"I don't need to be paid to escort someone home. Don't worry about it."

The man probably wasn't a merchant. He was pretending to be one. Who was he, really?

Hugo bowed his head deeply.

Ryuan and the man walked up the street a little way. Ryuan turned back to look at him. He held her gaze until she blinked, rubbed her eyes and kept walking.

chapter two

mysterious man



Ten days after the mysterious man had stepped in to help Hugo and Ryuan in the street, Hugo met the man again. It was when the Talsh soldiers patrolling the city were taking their evening break. Most of them stopped somewhere for dinner. Hugo was working at Tomuran's restaurant, waiting tables.

Early evenings were a busy time. Hugo was working in the space earmarked for parties and large groups called the Warumu Room.

Warumu wasn't a family name; the space was named for a popular peach-colored flower.

Hugo pressed his back to the wall when Talsh soldiers started filing in. He'd never get used to seeing them. The mere sight of them made Hugo want to throw up.

One of the Talsh soldiers turned to Hugo, who was looking down at the floor. "Hey, you! I wanna go see the kitchen. Where's it at?" His Yogoese was slangy and heavily accented.

"I'll lead you there, sir," Hugo said.

The soldier gestured to his companions, and they all followed Hugo toward the kitchen. On his way back to the Warumu Room, he noticed one of the soldiers whispering in a cook's ear.

The cook's name was Karl. Hugo knew him a little, but not well. He stepped out into the hallway, his thoughts troubled. What was going on? He waited in the hall until the Talsh soldiers left through the back door, then returned to the kitchen to pick up trays to deliver to the Warumu Room.

Karl's hands shook as he chopped vegetables. He was so pale that he looked sick. The other cooks gave him a wide berth; Hugo guessed that they also knew why the soldiers had come to the kitchen.

Karl waited for all the others to be busy and looking away. He reached inside his clothes and pulled out a tiny paper pouch. He dumped the pouch's contents into a small pot of soup and stirred.

Poison. It couldn't be anything else.

Another waiter came to the kitchen from the direction of the Warumu Room. He was the restaurant's newest hire, and quite young.

"Two bowls of soup for the Warumu Room, and make it fast!" Hugo called out before the new waiter could pick up any trays.

"Coming right up!" the cooks replied in unison. Karl poured out two bowls of soup from a different pot, then separated the poisoned soup into separate bowls. Hugo's sense of unease only grew. Someone in this restaurant was being targeted, but who? And why?

"Which guest is it for?" Karl asked Hugo. "If they've just arrived and it's a party of one, confirm that they wanted tazar added to their soup," he said. "It's too expensive to feed to the wrong person." He set a portion of the soup he'd prepared with tazar on a tray.

Tazar was an exotic spice from the south; Hugo had never tasted it. His shoulders slumped in relief. No one was trying to poison anyone after all... but then why did Karl seem so nervous?

The restaurant's youngest waiter, Toran, picked up the tray from in front of Karl. Hugo followed him out of the kitchen and poked him in the shoulder. Toran stopped still with his hands gripping the tray so hard that his knuckles went white.

"Oi!" Hugo said. "I can't explain it, but I'm worried about that tray. Can you give it to me to deliver?"

Toran appeared openly relieved. He passed the tray to Hugo without making a fuss.

"Sorry for surprising you," Hugo said. "You don't need to worry about me picking on you 'cuz you're new. Most of us are too busy to

think about stuff like that."

The young man nodded. "Do you, uh, want to change places for the night? So you can keep serving my tables?"

"Yeah, let's switch. My tables are on the other side of the room, so it won't be too hard."

The Warumu Room was only one of the restaurant's specially set aside chambers, and it wasn't as large as most of the other party rooms. Two waiters could cover all the tables there without too much trouble. Hugo took the tray of soup over to the table that the young waiter indicated to him and said, "Apologies for the wait, sir. Here is your soup."

Hugo looked up. The man at the table was the same one who'd stepped into to help him and Ryuan. Hugo was so stunned that he walked away, serving his other tables first before returning to drop off the man's soup. The man didn't protest. He seemed equally surprised to see Hugo.

"The cook added something to this bowl," Hugo whispered in the man's ear as he set the soup down on the table.

"I know." The man was nonchalant. "I saw the Talsh soldiers leaving through the back door."

Hugo blinked. It was true that the Talsh soldiers weren't particularly inconspicuous. Their physical appearance was strange enough in these parts, but their armor and weapons also glinted in the darkness. They'd be easy for anyone to spot. Hugo hoped that they were gone already. If the soldiers really wanted to kill this man, they might

surround the restaurant and lie in wait. He glanced out the nearest window and saw a Talsh soldier loitering at the door.

Damn it. Hugo frowned. The man was obviously no friend to Talsh, but anyone who made an enemy of a Talsh soldier in the city would be promptly arrested and taken away. The fact that the Talsh soldiers were trying to deal with this man more quietly meant that he was dangerous—someone important might notice if he disappeared. Or maybe the man was important, himself. Hugo still had no idea who he was.

Hugo left to pick up more orders from the kitchen. The situation troubled him; he kept thinking about possibilities and likely outcomes. Karl claimed that there wasn't poison in the soup. The Talsh soldiers who'd given that packet to Karl were still hanging around as if they expected the man wouldn't die from poison, so it was possible that Karl was telling the truth, or at least that he wasn't complicit in whatever crime the soldiers were planning. Maybe they were trying to capture the man alive.

For his part, Hugo very much wanted the man to live. He'd helped Ryuan, and he seemed to hate Talsh. Hugo returned to the kitchen, pulled the man's order slip and jotted down a message on the back of it. The man already knew that Karl had mixed something into his soup. If he fell sick or died, or if he was attacked outside, it would be disastrous for the restaurant.

Hugo had little time to consider. He went to the Suruha Room (suruha meant "blue sky") and found Toran, the young waiter that he'd traded tables with. He and the young man retreated to a corner. Hugo explained what he'd seen the soldiers do, and that they were still outside. Toran was still young, but he was sharp; he listened closely to

Hugo and didn't ask too many questions. He'd noticed a few strange things going on in the kitchen himself. Hugo explained the plan, and he and Toran returned to their duties.

Hugo gave the mysterious man his order slip and turned it over so that the man could see the message. The man read it and frowned. He crumpled the order note in his fist and said quietly, "I'll have to take a gamble on you, kid. I don't want to, but I have no other option."

Toran signaled Hugo from the hallway: his preparations for the plan were complete. Hugo looked toward the man, who locked eyes with him and nodded. A moment later, the man knocked the bowl of soup off the table with his elbow and groaned like he was dying. He tottered to his feet. The other customers in the Warumu Room stared at the man with expressions of alarm.

"Are you all right, sir?" Hugo asked. He offered the man his shoulder to lean on and said a few words to reassure the other customers. "I'll get him some help, then I'll be right back. Please enjoy your meals."

The man leaned on Hugo until they got to the hallway, out of sight of the other customers. There were several other waiters already there ahead of Hugo, including Toran. They looked concerned. The man leaned on Hugo again, and Hugo led him toward the private toilets at the back of the restaurant. Toran and the other waiters followed them.

They had to pass the kitchens. A few cooks noticed Hugo and the man and asked what was wrong, but Hugo didn't stop to speak to them. "Toran, keep Karl away from us," Hugo whispered. "Tell him that the

customer got sick from eating his food, and now he's furious and doesn't want to talk to him."

Toran nodded. He pushed past Hugo and the man into the kitchen and started scolding Karl in a shrill tone that made Karl and the other cooks flinch.

Hugo used the distraction to get the man to the bathroom down the hall and shut the door. He poked his head out of the room and whispered, "Sagil, take off your uniform."

"What?" Sagil blinked. He was a little shorter than the mysterious man, but they had the same build. Hugo explained the rest of the plan to him, and the other waiters shielded him from view as he undressed. Meanwhile, the mysterious man took off and folded up his clothes, then exchanged them for Sagil's.

"Nal, get the leftovers from the kitchen and take them out on the cart. I'll meet you by the back door soon. If the soldiers out there ask you anything, tell 'em it's time to take out the leftovers from the kitchen."

Nal nodded and dashed off to prepare the leftovers. Hugo issued orders to the other waiters, who were only too happy to comply. Their work was boring most of the time, but there was something strange and possibly dangerous going on now, and they were keen to be a part of it.

After Sagil and the mysterious man were both dressed—Sagil in a spare uniform—Hugo and some of the other waiters had the mysterious man stand between them so that he would blend in better. They led him to a small antechamber that the waiters often used during their shifts.

With the mysterious man concealed for the moment, Hugo returned to Sagil. Toran was still talking to Karl in the kitchen when he passed by. Karl caught sight of Hugo and moved to cut him off in the hallway. Hugo shook his head adamantly and told Karl that the customer was still ill and very angry.

"The customer is in the bathroom and doesn't want to be disturbed," Hugo said.

Karl stood up straighter. He looked perturbed. "Let me speak to him."

"I'm afraid I can't," Hugo said. He spoke louder. "The customer informed me that he would leave the moment he composed himself. I asked the other waiters to lead him out the back door."

Karl stomped toward the restaurant's back door. Hugo followed. The Talsh soldiers he'd noticed before were still there, but he feigned ignorance of their previous presence. "What's going on?" he asked. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" He inserted a note of alarm into his tone and found that it didn't take much acting.

The soldiers exchanged uneasy glances. Two pushed past Hugo through the back door; another rushed into the kitchen. "Oi! He's not here!" one of the soldiers called out.

Sagil locked eyes with Hugo and nodded. The mysterious man was safe.

Hugo squeezed his shoulder as a silent gesture of thanks.

"He's hiding in the room where we keep the leftovers," Sagil whispered.

Hugo nodded. "Keep him there for a little while."

Hugo turned to another waiter next to Sagil and said, "Take that man's clothes and burn them. The soldiers can't find them inside the restaurant."

The waiter acknowledged the order and went back inside. Hugo followed him, returning to the kitchen. Karl had also returned by this time and was being bullied by the Talsh soldiers. Karl put his hands up defensively, gibbering and claiming that he didn't know about anything that had happened. The Talsh soldiers pushed him aside and started searching the restaurant. Hugo noticed they were heading toward the Uma Room. Uma was the name of a purple flower.

Hugo heard the sound of the food cart that was used to bring leftovers into storage rolling down the hallway. Hugo noted where the Talsh soldiers were. None of them were at the restaurant's back door now. He ducked into the antechamber used only by waiters and gave a signal to the others.

The waiters spilled into the hallway all at once, briefly blocking traffic. Hugo found the mysterious man in the same room as the leftovers and guided him toward the restaurant's back entrance, where there was an enormous empty bucket set out. Hugo told the man to crouch down inside the empty bucket, then put the lid on it to conceal him.

Nal came by with the food cart. Hugo helped him load the bucket containing the mysterious man onto the cart. Nal pushed the cart down the hall and vanished in the gathering gloom. One of the waiters

approached Hugo and proffered a handful of copper coins. "That man told us to give them to you," he said. "To pay for his meal."

Hugo smiled and accepted the coins. The man was more strait-laced than he'd thought.

Sagil also found Hugo after rearranging his spare uniform; he'd been forced to dress in haste while the man was still in the restaurant. He gave Hugo a letter from the man written on a torn scrap of paper.

Thank you for tonight. Meet me tomorrow morning, on the street where we first met.

After reading the man's letter, Hugo tossed it in the fire along with other food scraps that had been set aside for burning.

He had nothing but questions for this man. The Talsh soldiers hadn't been there to kill him, presumably, but they'd certainly wanted to catch him. Why? To interrogate him? What did the man know? Getting more involved might be dangerous, but no force on earth could prevent Hugo from meeting the man again.

The Talsh soldiers continued to search the restaurant, but the mysterious man had vanished like smoke. They gave up after a while.

Hugo was pulled aside by the head waiter at the end of his shift and asked to explain the disturbance. He decided to keep the mysterious man's secrets as best he could and was reprimanded severely, but he barely reacted. All the customers finished their meals and went home, and the restaurant closed for the night.

chapter three

the canal at dawn



Although it was the beginning of summer, the early mornings were still cool. There were few people stirring yet. Hugo enjoyed the stillness and quiet of the sleepy city and looked around for the mysterious man. He knew that what he was doing was dangerous, but he didn't care. His curiosity wouldn't leave him alone.

As Hugo walked along the street, he noticed a man sitting on a wooden box outside of a store. The man stood up when he noticed Hugo. He was wearing Talsh armor. Hugo ducked down a side street, but the man called out, "Wait."

Hugo recognized his voice and approached. Disguising himself as a Talsh soldier was clever. Now that he was closer, Hugo noticed that his disguise wasn't quite perfect. The soldiers he'd seen had their sword belts embroidered in silver. The mysterious man's sword belt had the same design as theirs, but it was embroidered in gold. There were red-and-gold gauntlets on his wrists to match.

"I picked these up from the eastern guardhouse last night," the man said. "The lot you saw at the restaurant were from the western gate. You see a lot of 'em in the city. Now that I'm dressed like this, it'll be harder

for 'em to just haul me off." He grinned. "I want to thank you again for last night. That was quite a sticky situation. I was supposed to meet someone, but it seems I was betrayed. If I hadn't been so careless, I wouldn't have needed your help."

"Are you Talsh?" Hugo asked in a hushed tone. His eyes sharpened on the man, full of unspoken judgement.

The man shrugged. "From your perspective, I guess I am. But I'm not ethnically Talsh, obviously. I wasn't born there." He pointed to one of his gauntlets. "Do you understand the meaning of these symbols?" he asked.

Hugo shook his head.

"They represent the conquered state of Toram, to the southwest," the man said.

Hugo knew of Toram, vaguely; he'd learned a bit about it during his early education. The Talsh Empire had been steadily subjugating territories since he was a very young child. Toram was one of those, along with Orm and Horam.

"Do you know how many nation states Talsh has conquered on this continent?" the man asked.

"Seven," Hugo answered. "No... eight. Including Yogo."

The man smiled. "You're from a warrior family, like I thought. How the mighty have fallen." His tone was more pitying than cruel.

Hugo glared angrily at the man. "Whatever I came from, it doesn't matter now."

The man's eyes sparkled with something like interest. "You don't seem to have been in the lower city for very long. While I was hiding in the restaurant, I heard what your waiter friends said about you. You're a local legend in the lower city. Apparently you get caught up in brawls pretty often. But you don't do it for money, or for notoriety. I find myself wondering why you bother with all that."

Hugo snorted. "It's none of your damn business."

The man's smile turned bitter. "Is this really what you expected what would happen to you, kid? Expanding your turf in the lower city... why? Because you're bored? What have Yogo's warriors come to? I know your country's destroyed; so is mine. Don't tell me you've given up; I won't believe it."

Hugo flushed with anger.

"If you've given up, do the honorable thing and slit your stomach open. If you're not willing to fight for your nation, what's the point of your life? Why were you even born?"

"Did you ask me to come here just so you could tell me to kill myself?" Hugo snapped.

The man wasn't smiling anymore. "You... your father was one of the Mikado's Shields, wasn't he?"

The question felt like a knife to the ribs.

"I've guessed right, haven't I?" the man asked. "I hear you use a short sword to kill. Got a description of it, too, including the maker's mark. No one in this city has weapons like that except for soldiers and criminals. I

wondered which one you were. That's why I was interested in you, at first."

The man no longer appeared bitter or angry. The full force of his concentrated attention was on Hugo. "You survived," he said. "You alone, and none of the others. Remarkable."

"What are you trying to say?" There was expectation in the man's eyes. Hugo didn't know why. The man didn't have the right to expect anything of it.

"When I was just about your age, the Talsh conquered Toram," the man said. "Toram is smaller than Yogo, but we have a long history of warfare. Many more men were lost in war. Our people believed that we couldn't lose in open conflict, but we were proud, foolish—and wrong. My father and uncles were in the vanguard of the first major battle. I was raised as a warrior, and was in the vanguard with them. I was sixteen years old.

"My family was killed, but I was captured. I didn't know what they wanted with me. I assumed they'd execute me or let me starve to death."

Hugo frowned a little, but he didn't interrupt.

"While I was there, I learned that our king was dead. But Talsh didn't do it. The king's nephew killed him. I was shocked; all the war prisoners were. In hindsight, I can understand some of his reasons. He wouldn't have been able to inherit easily; the king's sons had more of a right to the throne. Deposing a king in a war isn't unheard-of in Toram's history, and he was of the royal family already. So he joined hands with

Talsh. In exchange for killing the king, he was permitted to become the next king and enjoy some of the king's previous power in Toram."

The man's lips twitched upward in a faint smile. "I understood that we'd been used. Talsh used our warlike nature against us. We were all pawns in their game—including me. They could keep me or discard me, I knew that—but I had no intrinsic meaning to them. All Talsh cares about is utility. If they can't use you for something, they'll abandon you or toss you aside.

"I had no use to Talsh," the man said. "That's what I thought, anyway. I was certain they'd let me starve. But if, for whatever reason, they decided to let a young, low-ranking warrior live... well. I decided that I would try to make myself seem useful."

The man looked Hugo in the eyes. "Tell me: do you hate Talsh? Of course you do; it's only natural. What do you plan to do with your hatred, then? Or your warrior's training? There's no other place for you to use that except for the Talsh army."

Hugo's heart beat faster. "The Mikado isn't dead. Not yet. Yogo's not conquered. Why did Talsh take him instead of executing him if they really want Yogo to be destroyed? The princes might still be alive; no one knows where they are. Even the Star Readers might manage to do something.

"I can do nothing," Hugo hissed. "I'm a warrior that serves the imperial family and the Holy Sage, and they're doing nothing. I can't, either, without orders—without support." His blood pounded in his ears. He felt cold all over. The muscles lining his spine tightened.

The Mikado and the Holy Sage can't do anything. Ten no Kami might not be real. But Hugo didn't say that aloud.

It seemed that Hugo hadn't given up all hope yet. It was true that he'd heard nothing about the Mikado or the princes being executed. The Holy Sage still lived.

Hugo clenched his fists and breathed deeply, trying to calm himself. The mysterious man was allied with Talsh. He shouldn't be talking to him.

"Talsh has conquered many nations during my lifetime," the man said. "There are a lot of people like you and me. Survivors. You look at Talsh soldiers and see them as one homogeneous group in lockstep with one another, but that's not the truth. Yogoese men have joined their ranks as soldiers; so have men from Toram. They remember what happened to their cities and their families. They're less loyal and compliant than you might think."

"Prove it," Hugo muttered.

There was something sad in the man's expression. He started walking away.

Hugo blinked in surprise.

"I will prove it," the man said over his shoulder. "Follow me."

Hugo walked at the man's side, frowning. As he walked, he smelled water. They were walking along the edge of the canal and the wind was blowing off the water, but the scent of water seemed stronger than normal. Hugo wondered if he was sensing the other world—the one Ryuan seemed to know so much more about.

"Do you see the mark written on the wall of that warehouse?" the man asked.

It wasn't much past dawn, so the streets were lit by torches. There was a line of warehouses along the street. Hugo looked at the one the man had pointed to and could just make out a crudely drawn eagle spreading its wings on the white wall. It looked like graffiti to him.

"That symbol means the warehouse belongs to Daguman. He's a sea trader. Do you know where he's based out of?"

Hugo said nothing.

"Orm," the man said. "Orm is Yogo's neighbor, I so assumed you'd heard of him before. His merchant connections made him valuable. The Talsh let him live to preserve his trade routes and wealth."

Orm... Like Toram, Hugo had heard of Orm before and knew a little about it. They were the most recent nation to fall victim to the Talsh, aside from Yogo. Hugo didn't know much about Orm's war with Talsh, but he knew that Orm hadn't put up much of a fight. The Talsh had decided to conquer them one day, and within the next few weeks, Orm belonged to the Talsh Empire.

Hugo hadn't considered how trade routes on the continent would be affected by warfare. It was shrewd of the Talsh to allow merchants to live—Hugo suspected that killing them would make Yogo's persistent problems with famine and inflation even worse.

"Daguman trades with a lot of foreign nations, including ones not on this continent," the man said. "You don't see it now, not yet, but in a few years, Yogo will be bustling and prosperous again, thanks to trade."

Daguman's not the only rich merchant Talsh is using, either. It takes time for wealth to circulate."

Hugo thought about what the man was saying. Why bother explaining all of this about merchants? Was he trying to reassure Hugo by telling him Talsh would take care of people's economic welfare?

"The canal is twice as wide as it was two years ago. Have you noticed?" the man asked.

Hugo nodded. Several canals in the city had been expanded. The one behind Ryuan's house was still small, but canals that led in and out of the city were always being worked on these days.

"They're making the canals big enough for large ships. That will make trade much easier for everyone. Hoshiro is close to the ocean and will benefit from these changes. Up until now, there was no way to ship a large quantity of goods to and from Hoshiro without sending them over land—and that's heavy, and takes a long time. Daguman never traded with Hoshiro before, because the expense of shipping wasn't worth it. Did you know that?"

"No." How would he even go about learning something like that? Why did it matter?

"Do you know who paid to expand the canals?" the man asked. When Hugo didn't answer, he said, "Second Prince Raul of Talsh. He's the one who conquered Yogo."

The man looked at the canal. "He's an odd one, that prince. Everyone knows how sharp he is—he's not a man to be trifled with. He started taking over other nations to increase Talsh's wealth, but that's not his only motivation. Every nation he controls winds up better for it. He's

improving the canal system, yes, but also the roads, and he's spreading an irrigation method to the farmers outside the city so that they can grow more food with less water."

Hugo looked at the man.

"First Prince Hazar is different. He enjoys conquest. He lets the people he rules suffer until they capitulate of their own accord. He likes the power that conquering nations affords him, and doesn't think much about governing afterward. He captures the old leadership and gets them to do the work for him. I suppose it's not a bad system, in its way—it certainly keeps people in line—but Prince Hazar's conquered territories don't prosper. He takes away their human rights, and taxes them into oblivion to pay for his next war."

The man smiled again. "Prince Raul isn't the sort of man to leave his governing to other people. He makes his subjugated provinces prosperous because he can use them better that way—not because he's any more compassionate than his brother. Once the nation's back on its feet after conquest, he starts increasing taxes bit by bit. But he doesn't bleed his provinces dry. If rumors are to be believed, Prince Raul genuinely believes that the continent would fare best under Talsh rule."

Hugo returned his gaze to the canal. He hadn't known any of this before. The goings-on of princes and emperors in foreign lands had no bearing on his day-to-day life. He still didn't consider Yogo to be part of Talsh. Maybe he never would... but Talsh did have power in this city, and what they did with it mattered. Prince Raul was responsible for the Talsh conquest of his city and his nation. His family was dead because of Prince Raul.

"People don't revolt in Prince Raul's conquered states because things improve for them—until they don't. Nations that have been under Talsh rule for a long time suffer, of course, and nations that have recently been conquered always foster some discontent. I'm here to keep watch—to discover the seeds of discontent before they sprout."

Hugo glared at the man.

"I joined Prince Raul's side because I wanted the survivors of the war to prosper. I didn't join Talsh for my own benefit." He frowned. "There are better and worse Talsh. Prince Raul's lot aren't all bad, but Prince Hazar's are, mostly. Toram was conquered by Hazar. I helped Prince Raul take it from him so that he could govern it instead. His prime minister's a piece of work—I understand he was involved in Yogo's war, too—but that can't be helped. War's messy business. All we can do is try to limit the damage afterward."

The man smiled again. It wasn't unkind, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Well, now. I suppose I have to decide what to do with you—the son of one of the Mikado's Shields. You have no reason to trust me; you probably think I'm a traitor to my own nation. I can tell you how loyal I am all day long, but why should you believe me?" He considered for a moment. "Well, you don't have to believe me, I guess. I don't need to trust someone to use them."

Hugo flinched.

"If you swear loyalty to me right now, I won't kill you," the man said. "Not to Talsh; I know that would be impossible for you. But to me."

Hugo didn't say anything.

"The life you're living now is pointless. You'll be stuck in the lower city forever and never accomplish anything. For what it's worth, I think killing you would be a waste, but leaving you alive and unsupervised isn't an option, either. Using you benefits us both. Don't you want to create a better future for Yogo?"

Hugo looked down at the polished stone of the street gleaming in the early morning sunlight. Then he looked up again. "Are you telling me to join the Talsh army?" he asked.

The man nodded. "Yes, for a start. You'll be serving with other Yogoese men; everyone under my command comes from a conquered nation. They're all in the same boat as you and me."

"I don't want to work for Talsh."

"Of course you don't. You have no choice." The man folded his arms. "I'll give you ten days. I'm staying at the eastern gate for the next few weeks, so meet me there. I can't guarantee your safety during that time, but if you come to me on or before that day, I'll make sure you see a brighter future for your homeland."

"My name is Oru Zan. The name means 'desert mouse' in Toram's language. I'll be waiting for you."

Oru Zan spun on his heel and left without saying another word.

chapter four

heat haze



Hugo returned to Tomuran's restaurant and his living quarters with his head down, lost in thought. There was a drowsing waiter near the door that Hugo recognized as one of the young men who'd helped him sneak Oru Zan from the restaurant.

The waiter noticed Hugo's troubled expression and sat up. He, too, was frowning.

"What's wrong?" Hugo asked. "Did something happen?"

The waiter put a finger to his lips, encouraging Hugo to speak quietly or not at all. "A... government official... came to the restaurant."

"Government official? Why?"

"To ask about what happened yesterday," the waiter said.

"Are you sure it was a government official? Were they Yogoese or Talsh? Were they a guard or a soldier?"

"I'm sure. The official was Yogoese, and not a soldier."

"Did he question you?"

"No; he's still here. He only got here a little while ago. I heard he was looking for you and Toran."

Toran was the restaurant's youngest waiter: the one Hugo had traded duties with. "Where is Toran?" he asked.

The waiter didn't answer, so Hugo turned around and headed toward the restaurant proper. He moved swiftly through the restaurant's hallways and saw several men standing in the Uma Room where Oru Zan had eaten the night before. The owner of the restaurant was there, along with two men who looked very much like members of the Yogoese government. Hugo recognized their uniforms; they were peacekeeping officials. They worked closely with the Talsh guards now, but their primary job role was what it had always been: to keep the lower city safe from crime and violence.

Hugo had seen some of these officials walking the streets before, but this would be his first time meeting them in person. The group of men noticed Hugo approaching and faced him.

"Ah, Hugo! Good, good. We've been looking for you." The owner of the restaurant beckoned Hugo forward. He smiled kindly. There didn't appear to be anything amiss. "These fine gentlemen heard about the little disturbance here last night. They were hoping to ask you a few questions."

Hugo looked at the peacekeeping officials. One was an older man, but the other didn't look to be much older than Hugo was himself. The older man was around forty or so; he had a sharp stare. Hugo felt like the man was looking right through him.

"This is not the only waiter who was present during the incident," the older peacekeeper said imperiously. "Find the other waiter and bring him to us as well."

Hugo decided that he didn't like the older peacekeeping official, even if he was Yogoese. Anyone who spoke with such disrespect for others wasn't worthy of respect himself.

"There is no need to call the other waiter," Hugo said.

The older peacekeeper looked Hugo up and down. "What do you mean by that, young man?"

"The other waiter was following my instructions. You won't learn anything from him that I can't tell you. Ask your questions, and I'll tell you everything you wish to know."

The peacekeeper's eyes narrowed. "What I see is that you refuse to cooperate with our investigation. You and the other waiter will be brought to our office for questioning." He turned to the owner of the restaurant. "Along with anyone else involved in the incident. I take it that won't be an issue, sir?"

The restaurant owner nodded. The younger peacekeeping official pulled a length of rope that he carried in pouch on his back and made to tie Hugo's hands behind his back.

"Sirs, is that really necessary?" the owner of the restaurant said in a tone of alarm. "No one was harmed last night, after all. My waiters aren't dangerous people."

The older peacekeeper shoved his finger into the restaurant owner's shoulder, making him wince. "Know your place. *I* am the one who

decides whether bonds are necessary, not you."

Hugo already didn't like the peacekeeping official, but now his generalized dislike kindled into anger.

The restaurant owner also appeared angry. "Any disrespect you show to my employees shows disrespect to me as well," he said. "I am the one who bears the responsibility for what happened here yesterday, not my waiters."

"No, sir," Hugo said quietly. "This is my fault. I'll go with them."

The expression on the restaurant owner's face was pained, but he nodded. He was an intelligent man who had used the Talsh presence in the city to his advantage; he knew that it was unwise to oppose the officials. It was galling to be talked down to, but Hugo and the restaurant owner both knew that it would be better for a single person to take the fall for what had happened rather than having the entire restaurant fold under government scrutiny.

Hugo was brought to the peacekeeping officials' main office and kept in custody for more than a day. They started by questioning him, but he got the sense he wasn't saying what they wanted him to say; after a while, he was beaten, whipped and deprived of water. He could put the blame on Karl, since he'd seen the cook put some kind of strange substance in Oru Zan's food, but then the restaurant would be in trouble. He could tell the officials what he knew of Oru Zan—the torture would probably stop if he did—but then he would have to reveal more about himself, too. Hugo didn't see any easy way out of this situation.

He decided to tell a little bit of a lie, but most of the truth. He said that he'd seen the customer in the restaurant being tracked by Talsh soldiers, and that he felt obligated to the customer for saving him and a friend from some dangerous criminals in the street a few weeks before. He'd decided to help the customer get outside without being seen, just in case his suspicions about the Talsh soldiers were right. He now considered his debt to the customer repaid, and he had no idea who he was. That was Hugo's story.

The peacekeeping officials started asking more detailed questions. From them, Hugo guessed that more of the waiters and the restaurant owner had also been questioned about the incident. Since the waiters knew nothing about the man, either, what they said corroborated Hugo's version of events.

Hugo was left alone for a day or so after the officials hit another dead end. The next morning, Talsh soldiers arrived at the government office to interrogate Hugo further. Hugo recognized one of them as the soldier who had given Karl the packet of spices—or poison—that Karl had mixed into Oru Zan's soup.

The Talsh soldier asked no questions. He received an abbreviated report from the Yogoese peacekeeping officials with an expression of disinterest, then gave orders to have Hugo released into his custody and transferred to a Talsh prison. Then the soldier punched Hugo in the gut with all the force of his frustration behind it.

Hugo's bonds were loosed. He collapsed to the floor, catching his head on his arms. The last thing he saw before he lost consciousness were the faces of the imperious Yogoese peacekeeper and the enraged Talsh soldier.



Hugo drifted back to consciousness slowly. There was blood on his face from the torture and he was filthy, but his hands were free, and he was outside. It seemed like someone had dumped him unceremoniously in the lower city, expecting him to die.

Some of the passersby noticed Hugo moving and stopped. Some asked if they could help him, but Hugo refused help. He stumbled to his feet and started walking. He wasn't sure where he was going, but if he kept walking, he was sure to end up somewhere.

It was a warm day, but not hot: it felt like a day at the very start of summer. The sunlight was intensely bright; Hugo watched his black shadow move with him as he walked and tried not to think of it as a moving bruise. The only thing keeping Hugo on his feet was rage: rage at what had been done to him, and maybe his friends as well.

The Talsh ordered this. That's why...

Hugo had limited experience with the Yogoese government before Talsh rule, but he knew that torture wasn't common. The Yogoese officials who had caused him to be tortured were just as bad as Talsh, but to Hugo, it was like Talsh had corrupted his homeland in yet another way. The Yogoese peacekeeping officials were meant to protect the Yogoese people, but they were only interested in what the Talsh wanted now.

The Talsh could capture anyone and torture them without even having good reason. That seemed wrong to Hugo on a fundamental

level, but he also understood that the Yogoese officials weren't necessarily safe from Talsh torture, either. They cooperated so that they wouldn't be harmed in turn.

When did the Yogoese people become such cowards? Hugo fumed. His vision swam with tears. He wiped his eyes and gritted his teeth so that he would stop crying. He put one foot in front of the other, still not sure of where he was going. People passed him by, speaking lightly to one another. Many Yogoese people were sitting outside on tables eating lunch, enjoying the bright, sunny day.

Hugo hated them all. He wished that the city had been completely destroyed, along with them—along with *him*. They deserved to die in agony for their spinelessness. Wasn't that what destruction was? Utter annihilation, leaving nothing left?

But no. Hugo's homeland was alien to him now, but everyone else lived their lives like nothing had happened. Some cosmetic changes were evident in clothing, food, and currency, but for the most part everything looked the same as it used to. Didn't people remember the battle? Didn't they care?

His head ached like the bones of his skull were pressing together. He groaned in pain and forced himself to keep walking. Hugo had no desire to return to Tomuran's restaurant; it might be dangerous to the restaurant owner and other waiters if he did. He couldn't stay with Ryuan and Yoar either; he didn't want them or anyone else to see him this way.

It's not real, Hugo thought. *This city... it's not real anymore. It's just a mirage. A shimmering image in the summer heat.*

The only thing that felt real to Hugo was his bruise-dark shadow. He extended his hands into his shadow, and it felt cool and soothing.

Hugo couldn't keep walking for much longer. His stomach was empty, but he still felt nauseous. He crouched down in the shadow of a wall, hugging his gut. He was grateful for the shade. A few people looked at him strangely, but no one called out to him. Maybe they assumed he'd gotten into a fight, because of his injuries. No one wanted trouble.

Sitting was a great relief. Hugo closed his eyes and waited for his nausea and dizziness to pass, then looked around.

Where am I?

There was a wooden fence across the street; it surrounded a candy store that was close to Mar's tavern. He saw a stone well through a gap in the fence. There was an old woman washing root vegetables next to the well. She looked vaguely familiar, but Hugo couldn't remember where he'd seen her before...

No: he *did* remember. The old woman was Shigan's wife—Shigan, the chef at Mar's tavern who had praised Hugo for the way he washed potatoes. Hugo had heard that he'd stopped working the previous autumn because of his worsening health.

Shigan's wife gathered up her washed vegetables in a basket, stood up and disappeared behind the wooden fence.

Hugo tottered to his feet and crossed the street. He peered in at the candy store through the gap in the fence. This was the lower city, so buildings were all kind of squeezed together; housing for the poor was built on multiple levels. He was looking into the store's rear garden: the

well was there, of course, and there were barrels of supplies lined up along the back of the building. Now that Shigan's wife had gone inside, there was no one else out here. The sun was going down. Hugo guessed that she'd been sent out to finish washing the vegetables and bring in water for the evening.

Hugo pushed through the gap in the fence and collapsed in front of the well. He pulled up the bucket hanging there and cupped water in both hands, gulping it down. After he'd drunk his fill, he washed his face and hands thoroughly. His head felt remarkably clear.

A man called out to Hugo. Hugo turned and saw him standing on a raised porch on the first floor of a building that probably housed three or four families. It was Shigan, the old, red-cheeked chef. He was much thinner than Hugo remembered.

"Mr. Shigan." Hugo moved away from the well. Shigan gestured for him to come closer.

As Hugo approached, Shigan's expression changed from one of surprise to one of concern. "Were you in a fight?" he asked.

Hugo's lips trembled. He tried to smile to reassure Shigan, but he didn't have that in him. Shigan's complexion was sallow and his skin was hanging off him, making him look even thinner than he was. He sat down on the edge of the porch and asked Hugo to sit as well.

Hugo sat. They were near the window of the house. Hugo smelled something cooking inside and heard the rolling boil of water. "What is that?" Hugo asked. "There's a spice I don't know."

"I'm sorry I can't give you any." Shigan smiled faintly. "It's medicine for my sickness. It'll help my liver. I used to drink too much—far too

much."

Shigan didn't say anything else. He and Hugo sat on the porch in companionable silence. Hugo was briefly overwhelmed by physical exhaustion and nearly pitched forward. He looked to Shigan and said, "Um, I'm sorry, but could I lie down here for a little while? I promise I'll be gone in the morning."

Shigan nodded. "Sleep there as long as you want. I'm not about to kick you out, kid."

Hugo blinked, surprised. He wanted to thank Shigan, but the words wouldn't come. He stretched out on the wooden porch and was instantly asleep.



Hugo awoke the next morning with a start. He didn't remember where he was. He sprang to his feet and felt his injured body protest at the sudden movement. A blanket fell from his chest as he stood up. It was light outside, but he couldn't see the sun; it could be early morning or close to noon for all he knew.

Because it was light out, Hugo was able to orient himself after a few moments. This was Shigan's porch. Shigan had allowed him to sleep here.

Suddenly, Hugo heard a woman's voice coming from the building behind him. "You said fourteen lunch boxes, to be delivered the day after tomorrow? All right; please write your address down here, sir."

It seemed that this place didn't just sell candy anymore. Hugo didn't remember this place selling meals, but maybe that had changed with Shigan's semi-retirement.

A man said something in response, but his words were muffled through the wall.

"Ah, the Kamuran estate! I know it well." For whatever reason, the voice of Shigan's wife was perfectly clear. "We appreciate your business."

Hugo frowned. The name Kamuran was familiar to him. They were another warrior family, though they were only middle-ranked nobility and therefore not selected to be the Mikado's Shields. His heart beat faster. *She said they had an estate... the Kamurans are still alive?!*

Had all the middle-ranking nobles been spared during the Talsh attack on the city? Hugo wasn't sure. He didn't know many of those families by name or by reputation, but he supposed that it was possible. He knew that most of the nobles who weren't from military families hadn't been killed, but he hadn't heard much of anything about other military families of lesser rank than his own. Had the Kamurans all been conscripted into the Talsh army, like the other survivors he'd heard about?

Maybe. Hugo thought that he knew everything about the lower city, but perhaps he was mistaken. He hadn't dug too deeply into the fates of other warrior families because doing so made him think of his own losses. He knew now that the Kamurans still had their estate, and it was possible that a few of them were still living freely, as they had before. He wouldn't know anything else for sure unless he investigated.

Did he want to know? Hugo looked down at the sunlight shining on Shigan's wooden porch and thought for a while. He was too hurt and exhausted to consider investigating anything right now. He stretched out again and went to sleep.

Shigan and his wife didn't disturb Hugo's sleep. They also fed him when he woke up, food as well as medicine. After eating, he found that he could think clearly again. Movement was becoming easier. There was no more blood in his waste.

During his brief convalescence, Hugo had the opportunity to observe Shigan and his wife working together. They helped feed the neighborhood as well as people who came into the store to make orders. A young woman who lived nearby sometimes came over to help them with difficult physical work that Shigan and his wife couldn't do easily themselves.

"I can't do much anymore," Shigan told Hugo with a disappointed sigh. "I observe the cooking and taste-test, but that's about it. My wife handles the orders and the running of the store. I'm glad to have her; I wish I could match her." He chuckled.

Shigan drank a medicinal tea a few times a day. Hugo always heard water boiling inside the store around lunchtime in preparation for Shigan's tea. He and Hugo would sit out on the porch in the afternoon and talk.

"I'm old and have no son to inherit; I'm far too old to get one now. I can't open my own restaurant, either; the Talsh taxes would crush me instantly."

The young woman who assisted Shigan and his wife was sweeping the interior rooms. Hugo heard her broom swishing across the wooden floors.

"I'm nothing but a burden now," Shigan said.

Hugo bowed his head, then squeezed Shigan's shoulder.

The day was cool and partly cloudy. Sometimes the sun cut through the cloud cover. The wind was strong enough to push Hugo's hair over his shoulders.

"I wasted my life." Shigan closed his eyes, then opened them. He took a sip of his medicinal tea. "But it's not too late for you."

Hugo tensed.

Shigan set his teacup down on the porch. "From what I've seen of you, you're not limited at all in your capabilities. You could do anything you wanted. Ever thought about opening a shop of your own?"

Hugo remained silent. He'd never considered owning or operating any kind of business. He had no experience with something like that. His life in the lower city hadn't been easy; he'd essentially jumped from job to job and place to place based on necessity and safety. Owning a store or a restaurant meant that he'd be conspicuous and would have to stay in one place for a long time. Neither of those qualities appealed to Hugo.

Hugo got up. The blanket that Shigan had loaned him was in his lap. Hugo folded it neatly and left the porch. He turned to face Shigan and said, "Thanks for your help. I'll do my best to repay you someday, if I can."

Hugo spun on his heel and walked away from Shigan's store without looking back.



There were seven or eight kids in the street, talking and kicking stones to ease their boredom. Hugo passed by them like a wraith, barely seeing them and not paying attention to them at all. He understood very well why he'd never considered putting down roots in the lower city: he still had the sense that it wasn't real. It was just a mirage seen through the summer heat. The real city—the one he knew from his childhood—had melted into that mirage. It was gone forever. Hugo couldn't stay in a place that wasn't real to him.

Strangely, Hugo was able to recognize that this place was real to other people. The youngest children he'd just passed by probably didn't even know that the world used to be different. He couldn't blame them for choosing to live their lives here, but Hugo had long since lost the place where he belonged.

The night of the battle was all death and fire, the but city had recovered from that. Hugo couldn't recover—his family and friends were all dead. At first, he'd thought that everyone was the same as him and that the city would never rebuild, but he'd been wrong. After a brief period of transition, life in the lower city went on as it always had.

Why? Hugo asked himself. Isn't that wrong? Shouldn't people remember what happened?

Even if the danger of battle was past, many people had lost family members and friends just like him. There should be some kind of permanent, obvious change, but there was none that Hugo could see. That was why he couldn't shake the idea of this place as a mirage. The flames of war destroyed the city he knew, leaving an echo or a reflection behind that was almost indistinguishable from the real thing.

Kamuran estate still existed.

Hugo stopped walking. He remembered Shigan's wife taking an order for Kamuran estate. He clung to that detail because he had thought that all the Yogoese warrior families were gone... but it was possible that the Kamurans were still alive. Still real.

Hugo was walking along a main thoroughfare that led to the Imperial Palace. He didn't know exactly where the Kamuran estate was, but all of the middle nobility lived on the same street—and all noble residences were close to the palace, anyway. If he wanted to look for the estate, this wasn't a bad place to start.

Should I look for them? The mere thought sent a shiver of fear up Hugo's spine. To find the Kamuran estate, he would have to pass the burned-out estates of the high nobility that the Talsh had destroyed. He might have to pass his own ruined house. He took a deep, steadying breath, then made his decision.

Hugo turned off the main street toward the nobles' quarter, walking swiftly.

chapter five

white dreams



Carts clattered up Blue Street, passing Hugo by as he walked up a steep hill. The street was wide and even, making it easy for merchant traffic to travel back and forth. There was a crude gate up ahead that the locals named, uncreatively to Hugo's thinking, the Blue Gate.

Beyond the gate, there were no more shops and stores, only estates ringed by hedges and surrounded by high walls. Men and women who looked like messengers darted to and fro on the wide stone street, moving from estate to estate. Their clothes were so colorful and they spoke so quickly that Hugo was reminded of a flock of fluttering birds preening in the midday sun.

After passing through the Blue Gate, Hugo shuffled off to the side of the road and stared at the manicured hedges that marked the boundary line of one of the noble estates. Now that he was inside the nobles' quarter, he wasn't completely sure where he should go.

For all that, the place felt familiar. Hugo resumed walking down the street, passing under the cool shadow of some trees, and felt somehow like he'd never left: like part of him had always been here, in some form or another.

If Hugo kept walking just a little way, he would turn off the street and go through the Green Gate, toward his childhood home. For the briefest of moments, Hugo was struck by the idea that if he went home now he'd find his parents and little sister Nahso there alive, as if nothing terrible had ever happened.

Hugo's heart rose to his throat as he walked. He looked at the placards on each of the noble estates that he passed, searching for the Kamuran estate. He recognized a few surnames, but there were even more that he didn't know. He wasn't used to reading anymore. Some of the unique characters used mainly for names were wholly unfamiliar to him.

Feeling cold through and very lonely, Hugo passed under the Green Gate, which was less crudely built than the Blue Gate and more consistently cared for. The Blue Gate was only called that because it was on the Blue Road; the Green Gate was called such because it was actually painted a uniform green.

Thick clouds partially blotted out the sun. Sunlight pierced the clouds ahead of Hugo, illuminating the noble estates that had once belonged to high-ranking warrior families within Yogo in white light.

Hugo forgot to breathe. He started running toward his house as fast as he could, passing familiar hedges and gates until he reached the gate that marked the entrance to the Arayutan estate.

Hugo stopped in front of the gate, out of breath and practically sobbing. Everything looked the same to him: the gate, the tall hedges, his first glimpse of the garden. Even the house was still standing...

The nameplate on the gate didn't say 'Arayutan.' It said 'Okunal Ota.' Hugo had no idea who that was; he'd never heard the name before. Okunal certainly wasn't a warrior family, but they were Yogoese; the 'Ota' designation indicated that Okunal was a branch family from a larger house. Maybe they were part of the lesser nobility and used to live in a different part of the city. Hugo thought that he'd seen the family's name on buildings in the southern part of the lower city before.

Hugo stared slack-jawed at the house and the nameplate and couldn't bring himself to move. A guard emerged from the attached guardhouse near the estate's gate and posed threateningly.

"You there, kid! What business do you have in this place?"

Hugo wanted to say that he was the last surviving heir of the Arayutan family and that this estate belonged to him, but the words stuck in his throat. He bowed his head, muttered a vague apology and turned away from the gate.

Retracing his steps to Blue Street made Hugo feel calm again. He wasn't here to find his own house, after all; he'd expected it to be destroyed. The fact that it wasn't was confusing to him, but that didn't change the fact that he couldn't reclaim it.

Tears swam in Hugo's eyes unrestrained and unbidden; they clouded his vision, but he made no move to wipe them away. He walked slowly around the neighborhood, reading every nameplate on every gate and door that he could see. All of the estates belonging to the Mikado's Shields were still intact, but they were all owned by different families now. Hugo didn't recognize any of their names. It seemed like a lot of

people who'd formerly lived in the southern part of Hoshiro lived here now.

Hugo walked faster so that the gate guards wouldn't give him a hard time, gritting his teeth. *I'm an idiot. What am I doing here?*

He should have let the past stay in the past. The moment his mother and sister died, Hugo had lost any semblance of a home. There could be no going back now. Even if he could live in his old house, his life would never be the same. He knew that all of Yogo's high-ranking nobility had been killed to a man, but he hadn't considered the fate of the medium-ranked and lower-ranked warriors until now.

Some of them had risen through the ranks and were promoted socially--Hugo saw that now as he walked among the houses and estates. But there were more foreigners in Yogoese homes than he'd ever seen before, indicating that not every lower-ranked military family was so fortunate. The conquerors had given land and estates to their friends.

Hugo couldn't help but think that his own estate had been stolen by greedy, grasping interlopers. But he wasn't predisposed to like them very much, anyway. He used his fists to wipe the tears off his face and kept walking. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to steady himself.

When he opened his eyes, Hugo realized he'd backtracked so far that he was close to the lower city again. The Blue Gate was in front of him; a small house that had seen better days was on the side of the street.

I can't make out much from here. The house didn't belong to a merchant or a warrior family. It was just inside the gate, so it didn't

belong to a commoner family, either. The house was out of place. Hugo didn't know what kind of accommodations lower-ranked military families used; maybe this house belonged to one of those families? He moved closer to take a better look.

The house was rundown and abandoned. What had happened to the people who'd lived here? Had they moved up into the estates vacated by the battle with Talsh and the massacre that followed, or had they been killed by Talsh themselves?

Why had the Mikado allowed all of this to happen? Where was he now? Where were the other families that had been deposed like the Arayutans? Were they all dead, too?

Hugo suddenly remembered his conversation with Oru Zan.

"I had no use to Talsh. That's what I thought, anyway. I was certain they'd let me starve. But if, for whatever reason, they decided to let a young, low-ranking warrior live... well. I decided that I would try to make myself seem useful."

Oru Zan looked Hugo in the eyes. "Tell me: do you hate Talsh? Of course you do; it's only natural. What do you plan to do with your hatred, then? Or your warrior's training? There's no other place for you to use that except for the Talsh army."

"The Mikado isn't dead," Hugo said. "Not yet. Yogo's not conquered. Why did Talsh take him instead of executing him if they really want Yogo to be destroyed? The princes might still be alive; no one knows where they are. Even the Star Readers might manage to do something."

There was no sign of the Mikado, or the princes, or the Star Readers. The people of Yogo needed their help and their guidance, but they were

nowhere to be seen. If more nobles were spared during the attack--it seemed like many had been--then they hadn't done anything noteworthy in the past four years, either, aside from survival. The middle and lower-ranked warrior families that had been spared were rising in the world, filling the void left by their slaughtered neighbors.

Hugo didn't think he'd be able to do the same thing in their place. Knowing that he was stepping into a wrongfully murdered man's shoes would make him refuse any offers of advancement. Even thinking about doing something like that made his head hurt. He was adrift in a sea of doubts and questions. There was only so much he could see with his own eyes; the state of the city now didn't tell the whole story of what had happened to it on its face.

He couldn't even see inside his own estate from here. He saw the hedges, lush and green, and the garden and house beyond them, but there was no one outside. *I don't know who's in the palace, either. I don't know if the Mikado is even there anymore.*

Hugo put his back to the noble estates and started drifting back toward the lower city. He didn't want to go back; there were no answers for him there, either. He'd already learned everything he'd wanted to know about it and then some.

He was eager for new information, new perspectives. As things were, he had nowhere to go and nowhere to run. Returning to the lower city was a death sentence for him if he was caught again, and there was no place for him among the nobles any longer.

Suddenly, Hugo remembered what Oru Zan had told him. *I'll give you ten days. I'm staying at the eastern gate for the next few weeks, so meet*

me there. I can't guarantee your safety during that time, but if you come to me on or before that day, I'll make sure you see a brighter future for your homeland.

Hugo bit his lip. Following Oru Zan into the wide world would certainly expand his horizons. He might even get some of the answers to his most urgent questions... but he had to swear loyalty to Talsh first.

The problem was that Hugo wasn't sure he could do it. Even the sight of a Talsh person, any Talsh person, made him feel sick to his soul. He hated them all and wanted to consume them in fire, as his family had been consumed. He carried the image of his father in his shining white armor close to his heart. His father had lived and died in service to the Mikado. His loyalty had never wavered--had never even been called into question.

Hugo's breaths came out as shallow pants. *I wanted to be like him. I wanted a life like his.* All he'd ever wanted was to grow up to be strong and brave like his father, and to follow in his footsteps so that he could protect the Mikado, his family and his friends. Even now, when that life was far out of reach, he still wanted it.

He'd once believed that Ten no Kami was guiding his path so that he could save his people. He knew now that he'd been wrong, but he didn't want to be wrong. His dreams and expectations for his own life had been stolen from him as neatly as his family's estate.

There was a cart behind him; Hugo heard the wheels turning. He walked closer to the side of the road so that he'd be out of the way. He kept walking downhill, toward the lower city. By the time he passed

through the gate to his old stomping grounds, he felt angry and eager to fight, though he didn't know where to direct his aggression.

Before he fought anyone, he had to get his strength back. He ducked down a side-street that had four or five restaurants on the same block and noticed one where a bunch of women were out doing washing near the back entrance. Some had noisy children with them, complaining about hunger or the lateness of the hour. Hugo took advantage of their distraction to do a little digging in the restaurant's trash.

Most restaurants were like Tomuran's: any leftovers were collected and disposed of. Some restaurants composted leftovers; others simply threw them out. Hugo had managed to feed himself pretty well by gorging on leftovers before they were discarded when he'd worked at Tomuran's restaurant.

Hugo guessed that the women were war widows. They had the look. Most women didn't work this late in the evenings, and certainly not with their children in tow, unless they had no other choice. The lower city was full of such shattered families, but they weren't always so visible. If their husbands were alive, they'd be back from working, drinking or gambling by now.

A sour smell stung Hugo's nose. It was coming from one of the little boys. He was obviously starving; he was struggling to breathe, hugging himself with his back to a wall. His mother tried to comfort him, but she was just as gaunt as he was.

Hugo looked away. He wasn't the only victim of the war, though there were times when he forgot that.

Yogo had changed. Most of those changes weren't obvious, which was why he rarely saw them, but he knew too much to deny the changes. Conscriptions were common, taxes were up, and the city was full of orphans. Hugo didn't know what would happen if those changes continued unchecked--both the taxes and conscriptions seemed ruinous. War-hungry Talsh would certainly produce a lot more orphans and widows as well. An image flashed in Hugo's mind of more children like that little boy starving while their mothers slaved away to feed them and starved themselves.

Rage welled up in Hugo uncontrolled. He turned around, looking for the Green Gate where the nobles lived in luxury and ignorance, and was almost glad when he couldn't identify it; the gate was lost in a mish-mash of other buildings.

The nobles won't do anything, Hugo thought. Not a godsdamn thing. They had time to advocate for themselves and advance their own positions in the world, evidently, but they showed no sign of doing anything for anyone but themselves.

The Mikado's Shields were supposed to fight for the people as well as the Mikado. Warriors of every rank were expected to make sacrifices for the good of everyone. Was all of that lip service?

Hugo could see the Green Gate now; he'd stared long enough for it to make itself apparent amid all the nobles' green hedges and white mansions. Being able to see it clearly forced Hugo to take a closer look at himself... and he didn't like what he saw.

After all... I'm not doing anything for anyone else, either. He was just as culpable as the nobles high up on that hill for the plight of Yogo's

common people. Well, maybe not just as culpable, but he did bear some responsibility for it, and he'd done nothing to shoulder that responsibility.

What should I do?

Hugo stood still, looking up at the Green Gate as the evening shadows deepened. It was a hot, sticky night and the streets were packed with traffic, but Hugo barely noticed his surroundings. He had a lot to consider.

chapter six

sunset



At Mar's tavern, Hugo had slept communally with all the other tavern boys in the rear of their work space, but Tomuran had special lodgings set aside for his wait staff and tavern boys that were segregated by job role.

Hugo didn't have any other place to return to and he needed to collect some things, so he went back to his usual spot in the lodging house attached to Tomuran's restaurant. The inside of the building was sticky and uncomfortable with summer heat.

After taking off his leather boots and his shirt, Hugo lay down on his bed and immediately sprang to his feet when the whip wounds on his back smarted. As he groaned in pain, he heard a door in the hallway open up on creaky hinges and froze.

The moment Hugo bent down to remove his boots, the wounds on his back smarted so badly that he jumped up again and yelped in pain. A door in the hallway opened; Hugo went silent and waited for the person to pass him by. He didn't know what would happen if he was caught here, but he needed rest.

Ryuan appeared in the hallway, peeking at him with her hand on the door frame. There was a taramu around her neck.

"Ryuan?" Hugo's eyes went wide.

Another taramu darted through the ceiling and wound around Hugo's neck. Ryuan was at his side instantly; she knelt down and helped him get his leather boots off.

"Mr. Tomuran told me that people came to the restaurant and took you. I got worried when I found out you hadn't come back, so I asked the taramu to search for you," she said.

"Oh."

Mr. Tomuran was a genuinely kind person. Hugo hadn't known it at the time he'd started working at his restaurant, but Mr. Tomuran and Yoar were related. That fact might have helped Hugo get his foot in the door if he'd known, but there was no need for him to rely on Yoar's reference. He was a good worker and Mr. Tomuran was a conscientious, caring boss.

From Ryuan, Hugo learned that Mr. Tomuran had lost track of him after he was taken away by the peacekeeping officials. He hadn't known how badly Hugo was being treated, but he grew concerned when Hugo didn't return after a few days and asked the neighbors and Hugo's friends if they knew of his whereabouts.

"Sorry," Hugo said reflexively. "I didn't want to make anyone worry."

Ryuan smiled kindly. "You've had a rough time of it." Tears glittered in her eyes.

Hugo looked away, frowning. "I'm fine. Really." He got up and prepared to leave. Ryuan didn't try to stop him, but she followed him down the hallway and got the door for him when it was clear that he was headed outside.

Hugo wondered how long Ryuan had been here. The bedding in his room was clean; he didn't remember washing it recently, so she must have done it. There was a bucket of water here, too, and clean bandages. Maybe Ryuan was expecting to have to patch him up, or maybe she was just preparing for any eventuality.

"Are you hurt?" Ryuan asked as they walked. "Your friends are worried, too. I've heard about Talsh's interrogation methods."

Hugo said nothing in reply. He didn't want to show Ryuan the deep marks on his back; he didn't want to see her pitying him when he didn't deserve it. But he also knew that he couldn't just leave like he wanted to. He wasn't strong enough yet, and Ryuan would keep worrying about him.

"I--" Hugo thought about what he should say. "I appreciate your concern, but I really don't want you to worry about me too much, all right? I don't want you to get mixed up with me again. Seems like I only cause trouble."

Ryuan nodded. "I can't promise not to worry-- but I'll try not to be overbearing, at least."

At her nod, Hugo turned around and returned to his room; there were already supplies for treating wounds there. Ryuan followed him. Hugo sat down on the floor near the bucket and rags and removed his

soiled jacket and shirt, revealing the whip marks criss-crossing his back.

Ryuan gasped.

"It's okay; they're not bleeding anymore," Hugo said. "They're mostly scabbed over by now."

Ryuan shook her head. "They're still bleeding. I think the wounds are infected. I'll wash them. It'll sting. After that I'll put some salve on them and bandage them properly."

The sun was going down. The last light of the sun slanted through Hugo's western-facing window. Hugo sat cross-legged on his bedding in a comfortable position while Ryuan treated his injuries. The first touch of the rag sent a rush of pain through his entire body, but he could tell the difference when his wounds were finally clean. He started sweating; Ryuan mopped that up with another clean rag. By the time she applied salve, he'd stopped sweating and the pain in his back was dull, not sharp and piercing.

After his back was treated, Ryuan spent some time cleaning the superficial cuts on his arms. There was also a shallow wound on his lower stomach that was scabbed over but probably a little infected; there was a red rash around the scab, and when Ryuan cleaned it he had to grit his teeth so that he wouldn't cry out.

It took more than an hour for Ryuan to complete her ministrations. The world outside the window was dark. She helped Hugo lie down on his bed so that he wouldn't brush against the bandages on his back. He stretched out and took a deep, cleansing breath.

"Are you hungry?" Ryuan asked. "If you write a note for me, I can go down to the kitchen and get you some tea and rice gruel."

"All right."

Ryuan fetched paper and a pen from a desk in the corner, but Hugo didn't write anything. He stayed still with his head on his pillow. He was hungry, yes, but he wasn't in any hurry to eat. He wanted to stay like this for a while.

The birds outside the window twittered sleepily to one another, breaking the silence in the room.

"I, uh-- I went to see my house today," Hugo said. In fits and starts, Hugo told Ryuan what had happened to him after he was released from the peacekeeping office. He told her about wandering for two days without food and being taken in by Shigan and his wife. He even told her about his interrogation and the Talsh soldier. Having decided to speak, he found it impossible to stop until he'd told her absolutely everything.

Ryuan listened without asking anything. She barely moved.

Hugo was scarcely aware of the passage of time. He only noticed that it was full night when it became difficult to see Ryuan, who was still sitting next to his bed. He hadn't spoken to anyone like this in so long. Talking about it all dulled the edges of his sharper memories. The more he talked, the easier it was to keep talking. His own voice sounded strange in his ears.

When he stopped speaking, Ryuan reached her hand out of the enveloping blue-purple shadows and squeezed Hugo's shoulder, avoiding his wounds, as if she were trying to encourage a child. The

skin of her hands was dry and cracked, but her grip was firm. "Hugo," she said through the taramu.

"Yeah?"

"I know you wanted to be an Imperial Guard when you were a kid. Did you ever want to be anything else?"

Cool wind from the window played over Hugo's warm forehead. His fever was spiking again. He wanted to answer Ryuan, but it took him a moment to decide what to say. She rubbed soothing circles into the base of his neck while waiting for a reply.

"I don't want to be an Imperial Guard anymore." Putting that thought into words made it feel truer, somehow. Even if it was what he wanted, that was impossible now. He'd wanted to be like his father, the embodiment of a protector, but there was no longer anything for him to protect.

"All I want now is to work so that the people of Yogo—our people—can be happy."

Ryuan stopped rubbing his neck. "Then keep working at Tomuran's," she said. "If you stay there long enough and learn all you can, Mr. Tomuran will help you establish a branch of the restaurant in the city that you'll be able to manage yourself. If you do that, you'll be able to employ people who need work and give the needy a roof over their heads."

Hugo's eyes went wide. Was that Ryuan's idea of a good life, a life where he could help people? She wasn't wrong to think that way, not entirely, but she was thinking on too small a scale. One business couldn't solve all the city's problems, to say nothing of the nation itself.

Shigan had asked Hugo why he hadn't tried opening his own business. Mr. Tomuran probably thought that helping Hugo do that was just and right, for Hugo and for other people. Hugo considered the idea of owning a business again and couldn't hold the image in his head. It was a mirage, like the rest of the post-war city. Any business he opened wouldn't be real to him.

"You're joking, right?" Hugo asked.

"What? No."

"No one-- why doesn't anyone understand what I want to do?" Hugo muttered.

Ryuan looked at him in puzzlement.

"Going on with an ordinary life in Hoshiro under Talsh rule is the same as surrender," Hugo said. "Why should I work to make the city better for Talsh? They stole my home and murdered my family—and now you say I should give them my labor and productivity as well, so that they can grind me down and make me helpless? No! Why would you think I'd ever agree to something like that?!"

Ryuan didn't say anything. She sat with Hugo, looking at him with her concern plain in her expression. She shrugged her shoulders, then said through the taramu, "We can't change where we are or what's happened to us in the past." She smiled bitterly. "But we can still change the future for the better. If we do nothing, then nothing changes. We're here, for better or worse, and we have to live where we are." She sighed, then put the lid on her jar of salve and tied it shut. Then she stood up.

"Write that note for me. I'm going to the kitchen to get you something to eat. You don't need to tell anyone else that you're here yet

if you don't want, but you must eat something."

Hugo scrawled out a brief message to the chefs in the kitchen and passed it to Ryuan. She left the room with the note clutched in her hand. The room seemed much smaller and darker with her gone.

chapter seven

the bowl



Hugo awoke to the sound of a tentative knock on the door and a muffled voice calling out to him. The room was still dark, but a little light spilled in from the slightly open door. There was something going on in the hallway.

“Come in,” Hugo said.

The door slid all the way open, and the smell of soup drifted to Hugo’s nose.

“Smells like medicine in here,” Toran grumbled. He placed a tray with soup and freshly cooked rice next to Hugo’s bedside. Considering the time, it was probably the end of his work shift. As the hallway quieted, Hugo realized that the commotion he’d just heard was probably a shift change. A few of the waiters hung in the doorway, peeking in.

“Oh, come in, all of you,” Hugo said, feigning irritation. “You’re blocking the hallway for other people, y’know.”

The other waiters scampered in all at once like they’d been waiting for an excuse, laughing and slapping one another’s backs in encouragement.

“Oi, don’t push!” Toran cautioned. “You’ll kick over the soup if you’re not careful.”

The other boys took this warning to heart and lined up along the wall so that they wouldn’t step on the futon or the tray. Toran knelt down in front of Hugo’s bed and asked, “Are you really okay?”

Hugo nodded, then stood up, but he couldn’t stay on his feet for too long. He sat cross-legged on the futon. “I’m fine now,” Hugo said. “Or I will be in a few days. Sorry if I worried you.”

Toran shook his head. “After you got taken away by those fancy officials, we all thought you got a better job for a while.”

“Don’t say that,” one of the waiters put in.

“Yeah, it’s obvious that’s not what happened.” Toran smiled apologetically.

“Hugo’s got a girlfriend,” Nal said, sniggering. “She came in here to treat his injuries. I saw her.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Hugo mumbled. “She’s my sister.”

“Really? Coulda sworn she was somethin’ else.”

Toran stood up and slapped Nal. “You’re the only one who thinks that, fool.” He faced Hugo again with a very serious expression. “Dauran’s gang are spreading the rumor that they beat you half to death. We all knew that wasn’t true, but they’re still after you, so keep an eye out when you leave.”

Hugo nodded in understanding. Toran actually appeared a little angry on his behalf, and Hugo remembered seeing that same look on

Ryuan's face when he'd met her after a four-year gap.

"I wasn't sure it was you. I was surprised to see you. You've changed... a lot," Ryuan had said.

Hugo had laughed. "I suppose I have. You've probably heard people talking about me beating people up and things like that. Well, they tried to beat me up first, but I guess it doesn't really matter. I guess I've become a ruffian, like your dad said. I bought myself a good pair of leather boots to hide a dagger in... taking over the other gangs is boring. It's too easy, but I don't know what else to do."

Hugo hadn't gotten in a fight for what felt like a very long time, but seeing Toran's angry concern and feeling his strength gradually return put a little of the old fighting spirit back into him. He didn't even care about who his opponent would be; anyone at all would do.

The aching void that was lodged where Hugo's life's purpose used to be wavered under the onslaught of Hugo's sudden enthusiasm to fight. Warriors fought. Even when there was nothing but life left to fight for, they battled on.

"Toran."

"Yeah?"

"D'you know who's spreading the rumor that Dauran's gang half-killed me?"

"There's a bunch of 'em. Why?"

"Tell me the name of the biggest, meanest one," Hugo said, sitting up straight. "I'm going after him next."

The other waiters exchanged excited glances.

“Not right now; not for two or three days.” Hugo smiled, showing teeth. “Hide me here until my wounds heal. Then we’ll have ourselves a party.”

Toran and the other waiters agreed with that plan. Some started telling stories of when they’d gotten mixed up with Dauran’s gang before; the feud between them was of long standing. When Hugo won this next fight, it would become a supporting legend in the long war waged between factions.

By the time the waiters left to go to sleep, Hugo’s rice and soup were cold. Toran stayed with him and watched him eat. The medicine in the soup numbed the cuts in his mouth. It also made the soup too bitter.

Toran waited until Hugo was done with his soup before saying, “Hugo. I don’t know if it’s my place to say anything, but...”

“Spit it out,” Hugo said.

“That girl--your sister. She said she had to leave because your uncle was sick.”

Hugo dropped his bowl of soup.

“She asked me not to tell you,” he said. “She said he’ll be all right. But I thought you might ask where she’d gone.”

Hugo remembered what Ryuan had said to him the last time they’d talked. *We can't change where we are or what's happened to us in the past. But we can still change the future for the better. If we do nothing, then nothing changes. We're here, for better or worse, and we have to live where we are.*

Had Yoar been sick then? Had Ryuan resigned herself to whatever might happen to her and her father?

Hugo's dropped bowl fell onto his rice with a splintering sound.



Three days after his return to Tomuran's restaurant, Hugo got out of bed early and requested a few hours off in the afternoon. His request was happily granted, and he left the restaurant after helping with morning chores.

It had rained for most of the previous night and it was still raining when Hugo left. The sky was streaked with gray clouds turned yellow at the edges by morning sunlight. The whole world was under a spell of gloom as Hugo walked through the quiet city.

He found Yoar and Ryuan's house near the narrow canal easily enough, but there were no white birds perched on the roof this morning, as was usual. No taramu came out to greet him, either. There didn't seem to be anyone at home.

Hugo stood under the eaves of the house with his umbrella and waited. Ryuan had probably gone on an errand or something. The door was partway open, and within, Hugo caught a glimpse of Yoar resting on his futon.

"Uncle Yoar?" Hugo asked softly.

When there was no immediate reply, Hugo assumed that he was still asleep. But then Yoar shifted on his bed and turned toward the door.

“Oh? Hugo? Is that you?”

Yoar invited Hugo inside. Hugo came in and shut the door. Yoar tried to stand up and stumbled a little.

“Please, don’t get up,” Hugo said. “You need rest.” He sat down near Yoar’s futon.

Yoar sat down again, his eyes drifting toward the fireplace. “Ryuan went out to fetch mending from people in the neighborhood. She should be back later.” There was no vitality in Yoar’s voice. His skin was ashen and his cheeks were hollow. Hugo shifted closer to him reflexively, worried but not sure that he should show it.

Hugo looked where Yoar was looking: at the fire. There were no fishes drying there like there always were when Hugo had lived here, and Hugo didn’t see any fish out being salted or brined, either.

“Can I help?” Hugo asked. “Where does it hurt?”

Yoar shrugged. “Everywhere.”

Hugo’s eyes widened in alarm. “Should I fetch the doctor?” The futility of his question struck Hugo only after he said it. Yoar was a fisherman, and everyone knew that fishermen had no money. Doctors wouldn’t make house calls for free.

Another sad fact struck Hugo: Yoar had a business, but no son. Under Talsh law, that meant he would either have to enlist in the army himself--impossible at his age, and with his health being what it was--or suffer under extremely high taxation on his profits. Yoar had made little enough money before. Hugo didn’t like to think about how little he and Ryuan had to live on now.

Hugo pulled out his wallet and was about to pass it to Yoar when his hands froze. The light of life was back in Yoar's eyes, but his expression was grim and forbidding. "If money could save me, I would thank you twice over," he said in a quavering voice. "As it is, I appreciate the sentiment. But I won't take your charity for nothing."

"A doctor could save you," Hugo said.

Yoar sniffed derisively. "Even if they could, you'd never get one to come out and save a poor man. I've seen their sort in the street, proud and pompous and cruel to people they think are beneath them. I won't have one in my house." His tone was firm, but there was no anger in his eyes.

"I can understand how you feel, a little. But try to understand how I feel, too. You and Ryuan took me in, kept me safe and taught me how to live when I didn't have anyone. Won't you at least let me pay your taxes from my wages? I know you've probably heard terrible rumors about me being a gang leader or a bandit or something, and some of those are true, but all the money in this pouch is honestly earned. I want you to have it. Please, take it."

Tears streamed from the corners of Yoar's eyes.

Hugo looked at the floor. He felt a crushing weight on his chest, and it was only getting heavier the longer he sat in silence with Yoar. Unable to bear the quiet and stillness any longer, Hugo stood up, bowed once to Yoar and left.

It was still drizzling outside. Hugo stumbled along the canal toward a patch of grass and slipped off his straw sandals when his footing

became too slippery because of the rain. He collapsed to his knees in the grass and hid his face in his arms, wanting to cry.

The tears wouldn't come. The pain of his emotions seared his chest, but those emotions couldn't escape through tears. Hugo hugged himself in the rain for a long time.



Sound returned to Hugo after what felt like a long time spent in silence. He heard people's voices and boats moving up and down the canal. Sailors shouted orders from the decks of larger boats. Birds twittered on the roofs of the nearby houses.

Hugo lifted his face and noticed that the rain had finally stopped. He was sitting down in the grassy area he remembered, and while his emotions still swirled within him, demanding some kind of outlet, he was calmer now. Raindrops glimmered on the grass around him, and birds peered down at him curiously from their high perches.

Next to his ankle, partially hidden by the grass, there was a small bowl. Maybe someone had thrown it out? Hugo wasn't sure why it would be here otherwise. The rim was chipped and there were spider cracks all along its surface.

There was a grasshopper inside the bowl, stuck. It kept trying to jump out and getting caught on the rim, then skittered back down to the center of the bowl.

“Do you want to get out of there?” Hugo asked. “You’re probably safer inside the bowl. The birds won’t get you as easily.”

The grasshopper kept jumping wildly. Hugo placed his finger on the chipped part of the bowl’s rim and watched as the grasshopper finally leaped and found solid footing on his finger. He set the grasshopper gently down in the grass. It was hard to tell, but Hugo thought that it was happy to be out of the bowl. Hugo would be. No one liked being trapped.

Hugo realized that he was anthropomorphizing a grasshopper and looked up at the sky to distract himself. *Grasshoppers can’t smile. Who knows how it felt?* He hoped no one was observing him right now; he felt more than a little like an idiot.

A breeze from the canal pushed Hugo’s hair over his shoulder. *No one needs me here. Not anymore.*

In some ways, Hugo felt like the grasshopper in the bowl. He was beset on all sides with people that wished to harm him, and he didn’t see any way out of that situation. Even though he’d caused most of his problems himself--even though he’d jumped in the bowl of his own accord--what he wanted right now was to escape.

Why can’t I get out?

He’d had a way out with Oru Zan and the Talsh, but he hadn’t been brave or foolish enough to take it. He still had no desire to serve Talsh, and when he thought of Oru Zan’s offer now, he thought it would be like trading his current bowl for a bigger one. Same situation, different stakes.

Hugo had long since given up on saving his city. It would never be what it was when he was a child. But he couldn't deny that he was reluctant to leave his homeland, no matter how reduced its circumstances. The worse things got, the more Hugo wanted to fight.

High above his head, a hawk was flying in lazy circles. Sunlight played off its wings in a dance of light and shadow, and Hugo realized something about the bowl he was holding in his hand: it was of Talsh design.

The bowl was cracked and useless to the Talsh now, but the grasshopper had used it to shelter from the prying eyes of birds and other predators. Maybe Hugo hadn't saved it. Maybe...

Maybe the grasshopper was trying to stay hidden. It didn't want anyone to rescue it. It was waiting for the perfect moment to make its own escape.

Hugo was born the son of a Mikado's Shield. He was trained to believe that his only loyalty was to the Mikado and Yogo's people, and that he would live and die according to the Mikado's decrees, but that life was no longer possible for him, or for anyone else. He was the last survivor of all the Mikado's Shields. By staying hidden in the bowl, he'd escaped the fate of his exposed family, friends and neighbors.

Sun pierced the lead-gray clouds, revealing patches of clear blue sky. Hugo took a deep breath. His hair was still wet and sticking to his forehead because of the rain. As the idea of the bowl and all its implications solidified for him, he found it hard to breathe.

Dark clouds hid the sky. Grass hid the ground. Maybe Hugo could be a person who moved in hidden places. If he was in the bowl already, he

should be able to use it to his advantage.

Hugo kept looking at the hawk in the sky until his allergies started acting up. He sneezed, then moved out of the patch of grass and took the first steps toward a new future.

chapter eight

changing tides



On the tenth day after Hugo's release from the office of the peacekeeping officials, Hugo went to visit Ryuan. There was no one in the house. Hugo found Ryuan when he went out the back door. She was kneeling next to the canal, doing washing. Her thin white arms and hands gleamed in the early morning sunlight.

A taramu wound around Hugo's neck. Ryuan stiffened and turned to look at him.

Whenever he spoke to Ryuan through the taramu, Hugo felt a strange warmth permeating his body. He felt it now, unchanged, and was reminded of happier times. He looked between Ryuan and the simple house, lost in memories. He remembered the boy he'd been, running all the way here with Shigan's stew carried carefully in his arms.

Ryuan shook out her wet hands and wiped them on a crude apron tied around her waist. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Why are you here?"

Hugo faced her squarely, let out one long, slow breath, and then said, "I quit my job at Tomuran's."

“What?”

“I gave my notice yesterday, and they’ve agreed to let me go. I wish that quitting being a gang leader was as easy as that, but it’s not. A lot of people are counting on me to protect them, and it’s harder than I thought it would be to find and train replacements.”

“But why? Why did you quit? What will you do now?” Ryuan asked.

“I’m going to join the Talsh army.”

Ryuan’s eyes widened. She went very pale. Hugo could hear a confused jumble of her thoughts through the taramu. She was the one who’d found him on that terrible night when the Talsh had burned the city. She knew better than anyone just how much Hugo despised the Talsh.

“How is Yoar doing?” Hugo asked.

Ryuan bit her lip and looked away. “You know he’s sick.”

“Yeah.” He smiled sadly. “I tried to give him money for a doctor, but he scolded me.”

“He can be stubborn,” Ryuan said. “Did you talk to him about anything else?”

“No,” Hugo said. “And I’m kind of glad that he’s stubborn. He still has his pride. I don’t think he’ll die without it.” He smiled again. “And he should be proud. I can’t even imagine the useless wretch I would have become without his help.”

Hugo wanted to explain why he’d chosen to join the Talsh army, but the words stuck in his throat. Every time he opened his mouth to say it,

he wound up talking about something else.

“I’m not getting into fights anymore,” Hugo said. “I quit that, too. It was just an endless string of big, tough guys who thought they knew how to fight. I guess I got bored of it.”

Ryuan blinked sunlight out of her eyes. He could feel a genuine sense of relief from her, as well as a sudden pang of loneliness. She understood without being told outright that he wasn’t going to stay.

Ryuan came closer to Hugo and took his hands in both of hers. “I’m glad, Hugo. Really. I worried that if you kept fighting like that, someone would kill you eventually. Anything you do now would be better than that.”

Hugo nodded. Then he removed his wallet from his breast pocket and passed it to Ryuan. “Use this to buy medicine for your dad, okay?”

“I, uh...”

“I’m not his son, so I can’t enlist on the family’s behalf and ease his tax burden. This the best I can do. Buy medicine, and use the rest to pay the taxes.”

Ryuan looked like she wanted to refuse. She was Yoar’s daughter, after all. But then she clutched Hugo’s wallet firmly and gave him a decisive nod. “Thank you,” she said. “Please don’t think you owe us anything. We never thought of you like that. I know you’re giving this to us to help--and it will help--so I’ll accept it. Thank you.”

She smiled genuinely, then added, “Dad will be happy that you’ve stopped fighting, too. I’m sure of it.”

Ryuan's smile transformed her face. Hugo blushed, a little embarrassed at the force and sincerity of her reaction. "I never thanked you properly for saving my life," he said. "I bought you a gift." He produced a blue-and-gold bracelet from his pocket, and Ryuan stayed still while he fastened it to her narrow wrist. Ryuan stared at the bracelet in fascination, touching its fine details with the tip of her index finger as if she was afraid of breaking her gift.

A flock of white birds flew through the sky and perched on the roof of the house. Their shadows passed briefly over Hugo and Ryuan as they landed. Ryuan looked up at them with a start, and Hugo noticed that she was looking at the blank air near the birds, not the birds themselves.

"Is there something else there?" Hugo asked.

She nodded. "It's a school of fish. The scales on their back shine like silver coins. I thought they were shooting stars for a moment." Her voice sounded a little shaky and breathless through the taramu. "They're being lured here--there's a lake, though I can't see it. I see the river that leads to the lake, just there. It's narrow here, but it opens out and gets wider a little further north. It's not just fish that I see. Insects, birds, animals... everything is migrating north, but I don't know why."

Hugo couldn't see all of that. The taramu wrapped around Ryuan's neck and his own were visible, but he could also see himself and Ryuan more clearly than he could see those otherworldly creatures. He could feel a little of what Ryuan felt through their connection, though, and there was a light in her eyes that brightened the longer he looked at her.

More than any other sensation, Hugo felt that Ryuan desperately wanted to follow the creatures she saw. Wherever they were going, Ryuan wanted to be with them. She didn't want them to leave her. The edges of her shape distorted, and her body appeared semi-transparent; like the taramu around her neck, she was fading into the other world.

"Ryuan!" Hugo seized her arm, and she became solid again. The light in her eyes dimmed as she faced him with an expression of disappointed loneliness. She looked irritated, like he'd awakened her from a pleasant dream.

Hugo let Ryuan go, not without some reluctance. Having felt her loneliness and her longing to be elsewhere, all he felt was pity for her, but he didn't want to say that. She would be able to tell what he was thinking and feeling without him saying a word, so he said nothing.

Ryuan didn't start fading again. She sat near the canal with her new bracelet shining on her wrist, pale-skinned and tired. "This place is changing," she said. "Bit by bit, a little at a time, so most people don't notice."

Hugo frowned. "How is it changing?"

"Beyond the lake where the fish are going is an ocean," Ryuan said. She gave Hugo a smile, but there was no joy in it. "So vast, it might as well be endless. The change comes from that ocean. The tides there have been changing for a long time, shifting slowly--but a small change there produces big changes elsewhere. Like ripples spreading out."

"Where is this ocean?" Hugo asked. Not for the first time, he was astonished by just how clearly Ryuan could perceive the other world.

Ryuan pointed to the harbor, and then beyond to the ships that traded with Sangal and the northern continent. "North," she said. "How far, I don't know." She kept pointing to the endless north for what felt like a long time. Then she knelt down next to the canal and resumed her washing.



epilogue

the flame road



The evening wind played over Hugo's face as he stared out at the sea. He let out a long sigh, feeling suddenly like Ryuan was with him even though that was impossible.

Hugo rubbed his eyes, but he could still see her standing next to him when he looked again, pointing ever northwards with her pale index finger. Her hands were pruned from doing washing, just as they'd been on the day he'd seen her last.

The months and years that followed his parting from Ryuan were a jumbled mess of violence, hatred, and self-discipline. He found Oru Zan again and underwent training in the army to become a Talsh taku--a spy, though the word in Talsh meant 'hawk.' He'd risen so high in the army that he now served Second Prince Raul himself.

Hugo was helping Prince Raul plan an invasion of the northern continent. Looking back on his life, this outcome seemed impossible. But Hugo had learned a great deal during his experiences in the army. He'd learned about governance, human nature, and betrayal, and understood that Yogo had been done in by the greed of its rulers and the meekness of its people. It had been conquered by Talsh manipulation and tactics, yes, but that wouldn't have been possible if Yogo's rulers and people had stood firm and united.

So Hugo no longer blamed Talsh for the destruction of his home. Or at least, not *only* Talsh. The world was more complicated than that. He'd learned from Ryuan that there was a world that most people couldn't see. He could see less of that world than she could, and that lesson made him look for the unseen in the ordinary world. There was so much that was not just unknown, but unknowable.

However, Hugo was encouraged by the idea of going north. The changing tides Ryuan had told him about so long ago were reaching out to pull him in, and he didn't plan to resist. Resisting a tidal wave or a whirlpool was fruitless: he was just one man. He'd live longer and discover more by going along with the flow than he would by fighting it.

He had also lost his taste for violence and destruction over the years. What he saw in war zones now was potential: broken walls could be rebuilt, fallow fields could be planted with new wheat, and children could be born as a new generation that knew nothing of the terror and senselessness that came before. People could not be as neatly replaced as a wall--Hugo knew that as well as anyone--but, having lost the most important relationships in his life, he'd been compelled to seek out new bonds and allegiances. That they weren't as deep as important as the ones he'd lost was irrelevant.

Hugo stood on the ship's deck, impatient to get moving. The third messenger hawk that the ship was waiting for was coming from Kanbal, but it was possible that the snows had already started on the northern continent. Kanbal was known for its long winters. If the bird was caught in a blizzard, that would explain the delay. Perhaps the hawk wouldn't return at all.

He thought about Crown Prince Chagum as he'd last seen him and shook his head. He'd hoped to use Chagum as a seed to plant his own plans... and it was still possible that Chagum would serve that purpose.

I'm sure the hawk will return.

If anyone could reach the northern continent on his own, it was Crown Prince Chagum. And if anyone could find him after that, it was

Balsa--the bodyguard his mother had hired to protect him as a boy. She was still alive, as far as Hugo knew, and everyone on the southern continent had heard the story of the bodyguard and the water spirit.

What do I do now?

He couldn't face Prince Raul now. He'd allowed Crown Prince Chagum to escape. He would be imprisoned and tortured, like before, and he might not even live through it this time.

The thought of that didn't worry him very much. He should be dead several times over. If he was meant to survive, he would.

There was a flash of light like fire streaking across the sky. Startled, Hugo looked up--and then smiled.

They were shooting stars. "Urora sura," he muttered in his native language. The light partially illuminated the many sandworms that swam in the wake of the ship's passage. He followed the trail of light and saw the outline of a very large fish in the far distance.

Only... was that actually a fish? It had legs and arms and was suspiciously human-shaped.

Taramu were drawn to the heat and fire of the stars falling. Hugo saw a few of them near the ship. "Taramu..." Hugo wondered if Crown Prince Chagum had seen them, or if he could. Maybe they would help guide him to safety, like they'd helped Hugo once. Even if the taramu didn't help Crown Prince Chagum, Hugo was determined to keep the path to the north open to him.

The figure of Ryuan was still there next to him, wreathed in pale fire that didn't burn. Hugo felt the warmth of Ryuan and Yoar's care for him

even from the great distance of space and time.

Hugo turned his back to Crown Prince Chagum as the sun crested the horizon, burning a white halo of light in the eastern sky.

my
fifteen-year-old
self



prologue

shadows at dawn



Balsa's arm twitched as she woke up. There was a chair on the other side of the room. She thought she saw someone sitting there, but it was just a shadow. There was still some time left before dawn.

The boots next to the chair were visible, and easily recognizable as her own; the sight of them helped Balsa relax. Wind blew through the half-open window, carrying a hint of winter snow that reminded her of childhood mornings in Kanbal.

The air in the room was clear and clean, but Balsa still smelled blood and smoke. She realized that those smells had come to her from her nightmare. She was a murderer, and her dreams didn't let her forget it.

Yesterday--last night?--she remembered sitting next to Chagum; he was talking, trying to soothe her, claiming that he'd made an alliance and that she didn't have to fight. He clasped her knee and leaned forward.

"We'll have peace soon. Why do you keep tormenting yourself?"

Chagum's eyes then had not been the eyes of the warrior and general and world traveler: not the eyes of the man who had taken over New

Yogo's armies. No. They were the eyes of the innocent boy she'd saved, open and defenseless. Balsa couldn't help but think of him as weak.

Balsa rolled over on her back and covered her face with her hands. "I need more sleep..."

She had said too much to Chagum yesterday: all useless petty things that she regretted saying now. She reminded herself that while Chagum was an adult and considered as one, he was still only seventeen years old. He was too young to be responsible for so many lives.

When I was seventeen, I had more than enough responsibility protecting my own life, never mind anyone else's. Could I have managed even that without Jiguro's help?

Balsa closed her eyes. Jiguro hadn't seen her has a burden. Balsa knew that, but she remembered herself as young and stupid. She looked up at the ceiling of the darkened room, reliving the dream she'd awakened from. A dream of herself at fifteen years old...

chapter one

life-and-death struggle



Balsa stared at the blood on the blade of her spear, but she couldn't identify who she'd just killed. She didn't even have time to wipe the blood off her face before another enemy came at her from behind. Her body twisted instinctively to the right; she leveled her spear at the new attacker and felt it in her shoulder when the spear pierced him deeply in the side.

Another man tried to trip her when she was low. She leaped back and kicked him down, feeling his body under her feet as she sprang at the next man, and the next; there seemed to be no end to them.

Balsa's vision dimmed around the edges. She couldn't remember when she'd started fighting. She wasn't injured yet, but she was exhausted; it was only a matter of time before one of her enemies broke her guard.

Damn it.

Balsa ran to the right, out of range of her closest attackers, and surveyed the battlefield. To the left was a high rock wall that was chipped in places and had a jagged upper edge. Farther right there was a ravine; the land sloped downward towards the river. The main road

was that way, but the footing there was dangerous because of the uneven ground.

Jiguro must have observed the same things as Balsa; he was standing in the middle of the road, protecting the terrified caravan merchants from bandits. There was no good cover here. The rock wall was shaped too irregularly to climb or hide behind, and the ravine was an environmental hazard. Under ordinary circumstances, fighting out in the open was a terrible idea, but now, it was their best option.

Jiguro's spear keened as he whirled, felling foe after foe, but there were still so *many*. Balsa counted ten still standing and holding their weapons.

Someone out there must really hate these merchants, Balsa thought. This attack was different from the ones she was used to. The bandits were numerous, well-armed, and at least a few of them were trained to fight. They also showed no interest in the caravan's cargo. Their goal seemed to be to kill as many of the merchants as possible.

Hiring a force like this assail a caravan would have cost a fortune. Balsa felt grateful that she and Jiguro didn't seem to be the direct targets of their malice--though Jiguro was certainly attracting attention at the moment.

That was because all the other caravan guards were dead or gone. Balsa and Jiguro were the only ones left. This caravan had only hired five guards for the journey. Obviously, that was nowhere near enough to repel and attack like this one.

Were we set up? Were the other guards in on it? Balsa couldn't see any of their bodies. She re-entered the battle, dodging blades and jumping

over blows as she raced toward Jiguro. One man swung wildly at her with his sword and made her bend over backward; she came back up with a stone in her fist and threw it as hard as she could at the swordsman's forehead.

He went down, and the way to Jiguro was clear. Jiguro was on the road, which meant he was downhill toward the ravine. Balsa sprinted, being careful not to trip as the marshy ground slanted sharply down.

They had to escape. There were still too many bandits. If she and Jiguro stayed here much longer, they'd be killed, too.

Arrows flew at Balsa as she ran. The muddy ground became rocky and uneven. She was forced to slow down, which made her grit her teeth. Going too slow right now might prove fatal.

They should have stopped to camp earlier, in a safer place. If the caravan had done that, this wouldn't have happened.

Balsa stopped moving close to where she'd retreated before, surrounded by shouts and enemies and flying arrows. Then she snapped herself out of her brief paralysis and kept running. She had to keep going. If she stopped again, she was dead.

Suddenly, a piercing pain shot through Balsa's right leg, and it went out from under her. She landed on her back and rolled to her side. There was an arrow sticking out of her right thigh.

Gritting her teeth, Balsa broke the arrowhead--mercifully, it had gone through her leg without impacting bone. She bit her tongue so that she wouldn't scream.

Dad, don't look over here. Don't focus on me. Don't...

Jiguro would rush to protect her if he noticed that she was in trouble. She didn't want his help. He shouldn't abandon what was left of their employers for her sake. She ripped her clothes for a tourniquet and tied it tightly above her gushing leg wound and took a few deep breaths. Then she stumbled to her feet.

She'd lost her spear. Balsa had nothing but the broken arrow in her hand when the next bandit faced her with his weapon. She got in close before he could strike her and shoved the splintered arrow into his gut.

After that, Balsa was barehanded and injured on a battlefield. She froze again, not sure what to do...

Then her body took over. Sights, sounds, and smells reached her as if through a fog as she dodged opponents and searched the blood-soaked battlefield for a weapon. She found her spear again, but it was too hard for her to carry it and stand at the same time, so she crawled along the ground like a brown bear cub seeking its mother, tripping who she could and rolling to avoid blows.

Balsa's breathing was too loud in her own ears. Her lungs felt like they were on fire, and there was still blood in her eyes from when it had sprayed at her earlier. The spear she was dragging along felt indescribably heavy.

A hand seized Balsa's shoulder and spun her around. A bandit was about to skewer her with his own spear; she brought her weapon up with both arms and used it to protect her stomach. He was so strong that she lost her grip--

--and then another man came up behind her attacker, smacking him across the head with his spear. He was saying something, but Balsa

couldn't make out words. She had to look at his mouth to understand him.

"Balsa, it's me!" Jiguro called out.

No one else was moving. She and Jiguro faced one another as she struggled to get her breathing under control.

Jiguro crouched down next to her. "It's over," he said. "It's done."

As the idea that she was finally safe sank in, Balsa's vision went dark at the edges. Jiguro shook her shoulders. "Balsa, stay awake. You can't pass out. Not yet. Pull yourself together!"

The shaking restored Balsa's awareness, but it also hurt. She set her jaw and nodded.

Jiguro placed Balsa's left arm around his neck and helped support her as they walked. The arrow wound in Balsa's leg sent shooting pain through her entire body at every step.

Some of the bandits they passed were still alive, though none of them were in any shape to fight. Balsa and Jiguro kept walking downhill back to the road toward the ravine. That was where the caravan wagons were, but Balsa didn't think Jiguro was trying to return to the caravan. These bandits probably had more allies, and when they learned what had happened here they'd send more men to steal the cargo and pick off survivors. If Jiguro and Balsa wanted to live, their best option was to take refuge in the deep forest on the other side of the ravine.

Jiguro and Balsa walked past the caravan wagons and made their way carefully to the riverbed at the bottom of the ravine. "We were set up," Balsa said hoarsely. "Weren't we?"

“Yeah.”

“Who betrayed us?” Balsa asked. “Do you know?” She assumed that one of the caravan guards--or several--had been in communication with the bandits. How else would they have known where to attack?

“I don’t,” Jiguro said. “The merchants fled across the river at the first sign of trouble. We can’t rule them out as suspects.”

Balsa looked confused. “But they already paid us half. Why would they try to kill us off now?”

Jiguro chuckled. “Easy enough to take back their advance payment after we’re dead,” he said.

“Cheapskates,” she said. “No amount of money’s worth a life.”

Jiguro didn’t say anything to that. Not for a while. When they passed under the shadow of the trees, he said, “If you can’t trade money for lives, you might want to look for a different line of work.”

For Balsa, there was no other way of life. Since she was six years old, her own life was constantly under threat from Kanbalese pursuers. She didn’t think that would ever change. And her own personal enemies weren’t after money--just her life. The only way to deal with that problem was to kill anyone who came after her.

Balsa wasn’t capable of that. Some bandits had nearly done her in. She needed to be better, stronger, faster...

Balsa lost consciousness while thinking about the mistakes she’d made during the battle. Killing to save herself felt like a contradiction, but she couldn’t figure out why, and she saw no other path for her own life.



The wind carried the scent of blood and the sound of voices singing into the forest. Balsa couldn't tell if she was asleep or awake. The voices kept singing, but they weren't soothing.

There was someone talking to Jiguro--a doctor. "I'm not hurt," Jiguro said quietly. "This blood belongs to the people who attacked us. My daughter took an arrow in the leg. I don't know how deep the wound is."

The doctor probed the edges of Balsa's wound, making her sit up with a start.

"It's deep, but it's not too bad. I'm not hurt otherwise." Balsa said this, but neither Jiguro nor the doctor reacted. Was her voice that quiet? Balsa forced her eyes open and looked at the doctor.

It was a woman. Balsa hadn't expected that. She looked into the woman's deep brown eyes and felt her curiosity and concern. She was beautiful, with dark hair and pale skin. She held a length of silk in her hand that looked like a bandage: it was all wadded up.

"It's dangerous for you two to be alone in the woods with this injury," the doctor said primly. "But the nearest inn is two days' journey. Hmm..."

The doctor turned and faced several other women standing a little way behind her in the trees. Their clothing was bright and colorful, and

they were carrying instruments like flutes and drums. Traveling musicians, maybe?

“We’ll stay here tonight, if that’s all right,” Jiguro said. “Would you prepare a tent for us? We’ll pay you for the trouble.”

Commotion among the musicians. “We can’t stop here. We won’t make our concert in Aharan tomorrow if we do.” They were all appealing to the doctor, who seemed to be their leader.

Jiguro listened to their complaints, then said, “Leader of the Sadan Taram, please don’t concern yourselves with us. Thank you for your consideration. Please be on your way.” Balsa learned later that Sadan Taram was the name of the group of musicians. Jiguro had met them before, long ago.

“But...”

Jiguro put up his hand so that the woman wouldn’t protest. “If you have a little time and resources to spare, I’ll pay you for some food and medicine.”

The woman narrowed her eyes, then nodded. “Of course we’ll give you food and medicine. There’s no need to pay us.”

Jiguro tried to pay anyway, and the woman’s face became stern. “Now, now,” she said. “We have a reputation to uphold, good sir. What would people say of us if we charged a man for medicine to tend to his sick daughter?”

The other women nodded; a few smiled.

Jiguro shrugged helplessly. “Well, then. I thank you ladies kindly for your compassion.”

More smiles; a few giggles. A manservant fetched supplies for Jiguro and Balsa while the women gathered firewood from the forest. They built a fire and boiled water for a medicinal tea to give to Balsa.

“Fetch more water,” the leader/doctor said. “This girl has lost a lot of blood. She needs more water if she’s going to feel better.”

Jiguro shook his head. “I’ll take care of that. You’ve done more than enough for us. Please be on your way.”

“But we--”

“--I’m fine,” Balsa said, cutting in before Jiguro could say anything. “I lost some blood, but I won’t die. I should be well enough to walk to the river myself by morning.”

The woman stared at Balsa for a while with her eyes wide and her head tilted, like she was trying to figure out what Balsa was thinking. She shrugged, then smiled. She gave orders for departure, and she and the other musicians packed their things in a wagon and headed for the road.

Before she left, the woman faced Balsa and Jiguro one last time with a bright smile. “The next time we meet, let’s share a full meal and drink together.”

Jiguro bowed his head deeply. “Yes. I’ll treat you and your musicians to whatever you would like in repayment of your kindness.”

Balsa tried to get up and bow, too, but her limbs felt as heavy as lead.

The woman waved to Balsa, bowed, and then followed her companions into the trees. The world around was much more still and quiet with them gone.

“I saw that you broke the arrowhead,” Jiguro said. “I have to pull out the shaft now.”

Balsa focused her attention on Jiguro. He examined her wound in the light of the fire with a critical expression. “The good news is that it missed the major blood vessels...”

Jiguro made a better tourniquet for Balsa’s leg with twine, tying it so tight that it hurt. He gave Balsa alcohol to drink in the hope that it might dull her senses to the pain. It was so strong that it burned the back of her throat as she swallowed it and kept burning as it went down, spreading heat to her entire body.

“We need something for you to bite,” Jiguro muttered.

Balsa’s eyes lit on the length of silk that the woman had left next to her bedroll. When it was all wadded up, it would be cleaner and softer than a stick.

Jiguro noticed the silk as well and put it carefully in her mouth. Then he poured all the remaining alcohol in his jug onto Balsa’s wound. Balsa writhed and groaned as the agony of disinfection warred with the sharp piercing pain of her injury.

It was difficult to remove the shaft at this stage because she’d broken off the arrowhead before, and her flesh had constricted around the wood. Jiguro tried to yank out what little of the shaft he could grab until sweat stood out on his forehead, but he couldn’t budge the splintering wood so much as an inch. He paused often to pour hot water with herbs in it onto her leg to keep the area clean, but Balsa barely noticed. Her perception shrank to include her pain and nothing else. She wept bitter

tears more than once before Jiguro finally managed to ease the first piece of the shaft out, then the next, bit by slow bit.

When he was finally done, Jiguro bandaged the wound, and Balsa spat out the wad of silk in her mouth. "You're a butcher."

Jiguro snorted. "You're welcome," he said wearily. "Next time, don't freeze in the middle of a battlefield and get yourself shot."

So Jiguro *had* been watching her. He'd been watching her the whole time. She glanced down at her bandage, which was nearly soaked through, and closed her eyes. She really should have guessed that he'd been keeping an eye on her.

Jiguro set up nets in the trees around them like he was planning to catch birds, but Balsa thought he probably had a different purpose. They had to be alert to many threats here. Nets wouldn't kill any enemies that stumbled on their camp, but they would slow them down.

He kept wandering around the camp further and further afield until Balsa couldn't see him anymore. He often left her alone at camp to hunt or gather wood, so she didn't worry at first, but when he was gone for hours, anxiety gnawed at her gut. She was hurt and still needed help. She couldn't defend herself like this. Where had he gone?

Balsa slept fitfully. Every time she awoke, she scanned the trees around the camp looking for Jiguro, but he didn't come back all night. The sun was high in the sky by the time he returned.

He was carrying water in a leather satchel that the musicians had left food in for them the night before. It was completely full of water, and Jiguro sat with her to help her drink it. The water tasted faintly of leather, but was so cool and refreshing that she gulped it down eagerly.

After she'd drunk her fill, Jiguro took up a clean rag and started washing the blood off of her face and hands.

"I can do that," Balsa said irritably.

Jiguro kept cleaning her face as if he hadn't heard her. She tried to take the rag, but she couldn't grip it easily. She glared at Jiguro, showing her displeasure plainly.

She couldn't tell what Jiguro was thinking. His expression was blank and his eyes were on her hands, not her face.

Balsa closed her eyes. She wanted to be better five minutes ago. She didn't think either of them had the patience for a long convalescence.

chapter two

tavern life



The tavern kitchens were open long before the tavern itself was. There were a lot of tasks to do to get the place ready for customers: cleaning, drawing and boiling water, preparing food.

Balsa came in the back door and heard several people talking to one another in the tavern's kitchen. She noticed a girl in the hallway peeling potatoes in a basket. "Excuse me," she said. "I'm looking for a bodyguard named Jiguro. Is he staying here?"

"Yes," the girl said, "though he's not usually back here in the kitchen with us. I think he's guarding the door. You might look for him there."

Balsa bowed, thanked the girl, and left the tavern through the back door. It had been almost two weeks since they were attacked by bandits, and Balsa's arrow wound had healed well enough that she could walk without too much pain. They'd traveled north from Rota's capital along the Houra River, very slowly at first, until they'd reached this small settlement. It wasn't anything like Toluan or Jitan, Rota's largest cities for trade, but many shippers and fishermen passed this way en route to those places. Balsa noticed several boats moored along

the riverbank as she came outside. This was a good place to buy supplies or rest during a longer journey.

The settlement was not large, but people were constantly coming and going, and the streets were crowded. Consequently, there were also a lot of bodyguards and caravan guards here, looking for work. Balsa and Jiguro had spent a lot of time here before, between jobs, though they'd rarely taken on work here.

Jiguro was probably concerned about Balsa's injury. That was why he'd decided to stay here instead of taking a caravan job. For her part, Balsa didn't want to stay here for too long. She felt like they'd been forced into this position because of her, and it was always safer from their pursuers when they were on the move than when they stayed in one place.

The late afternoon sunlight was warm and springlike, but the breeze blowing off the river was cold enough to raise goosebumps on her skin. Balsa pulled up her collar to keep her neck and chest warm as she walked along the riverside to the front of the tavern. As expected, Jiguro was there, sitting near the door at a table. The floor, long tables and chairs were lined up in neat rows and had a bright wood sheen from fresh polishing. The smell of the polish hung in the air, sharp like vinegar.

There was an open scroll on the table in front of Jiguro, and a cup of steaming tea set a little to the side of it. He was taking a break before the night shift. Red-gold sunlight shone through the windows, illuminating the scroll.

Balsa remained still and silent, unwilling to interrupt Jiguro while he was reading. The sight of him sitting peacefully at a table was incongruous to her. She knew Jiguro liked reading, but this was a place where he worked--was it really okay for him to read instead of guarding the place?

Jiguro had been a King's Spear. Balsa still thought of him as one. They'd left Kanbal when she was six years old. Jiguro had lost his social status and reputation, but he'd maintained his training and discipline as a King's Spear for all this time. Balsa knew that King's Spears did receive an education in art, history and poetry as well as fighting, so perhaps the sight of Jiguro reading shouldn't be so strange to her. She realized that it bothered her because Jiguro should be reading and fighting in Kanbal, not here. He should still be the nation's most venerated warrior, and he wasn't--because he'd honored his friend's request and saved her life.

Suddenly, Jiguro looked up from his scroll and noticed her standing in the doorway of the tavern. Balsa set aside her memories and guilt and approached him with a slight smile on her face. "What are you reading?" she asked.

Jiguro angled the scroll toward her. The parchment it was written on was yellowed with age, but in good condition otherwise. The lettering was crisp, clear, and artfully arranged across the scroll. Simply looking at it was soothing.

"Rolua's poetry," he said. "I've always liked it. He has a different perspective on life. Would you like to read some?"

"Me, read poetry?" Balsa shook her head and smiled self-deprecatingly. "It'd put me to sleep."

Jiguro snorted. "You have no taste for the finer things." He set the scroll aside. "Have you found a place to work?"

"Yeah, Furahan's Restaurant on Yakura Street is hiring a live-in guard. They said they'd take me on for a few days, at least."

Jiguro looked at her with suspicion in his eyes. Most stores wouldn't hire a fifteen-year-old female guard even on a temporary basis--and guard contracts were broad, in terms of job requirements. Aside from protecting the place--the most critical requirement--Balsa would have to do as the store owner said. He wasn't wrong to be concerned about what a store owner might require from a fifteen-year-old girl he'd hired.

Balsa understood those concerns, but she didn't share them. As caravan guards, she could pretend to be Jiguro's apprentice and make half his wage, but the stores in town were looking more for workers than for guards. She suspected she'd been hired on as a waitress and cook who would also have some bodyguarding duties because it was cheaper than hiring another worker and a guard. She wouldn't make much--not nearly as much as she could working with Jiguro in a caravan--but at least she'd make something. It was a lot harder to find employment for two people at the same place than it was for Jiguro to work alone.

Up until the last year or so, Balsa had usually washed dishes for little or no pay at the restaurants and taverns Jiguro worked at. But she'd gotten sick of that, and asked Jiguro if he would let her look for more

interesting work. He'd praised her initiative and allowed it, and she was grateful.

"Furahan's is a big place," Balsa said. "D'you know it?"

"Yeah," he said. "They're known for their chicken and imported liquor. Gamblers and brigands are frequent customers, so watch your step. I know where it is; it's close to the river."

"Do you think I shouldn't work there?" If most of the customers were bandits or criminals, it might be dangerous.

"Nah, it's fine. Like I said, watch your step and keep your head down. They'll pay you if you work; their reputation as employers is fine. Just come see me every couple of days so I know nothing's happened."

"I will," Balsa said with a firm nod.



"Wow, you're a natural!" the head cook said when Balsa passed her a basket of freshly peeled vegetables. "I thought you were an oddball at first--carrying that heavy spear everywhere--but it seems like I can make use of you after all."

Balsa bowed her head and got to work on the next basket. It felt like she'd been peeling for hours. When she finished one basket, there were two more for her to do next. She peeled without even looking at the vegetables, letting her hands do the work while her mind wandered elsewhere. She focused her eyes on a particular spot on the floor and

didn't shift her gaze even once until she'd finished peeling everything given to her.

After peeling came chopping of grains and sprouts in preparation of them being pounded into a finer powder. She discarded the unusable grains in a pot and went outside to dispose of them in the compost pile to the side of the well. While she was there, she decided to draw water up in a bucket and use it to wash the vegetables she'd peeled. Many vegetables had a sour taste unless they were washed thoroughly before cooking.

Other cooks and waitresses were milling around the well, either working like she was or taking a break to talk with their friends. They all had their sleeves rolled up neatly. Balsa heard a few of them whispering about something--was that a name?--but she couldn't quite make out what they were saying.

The group of young women burst out into raucous laughter. They were teasing one of the women; apparently she had a crush on a customer or something.

"Hey, you!" one of the women called out to Balsa. "What do you think of Mr. Sahku? Do you know him?"

"I'm new," Balsa mumbled, returning to her work. She rubbed at her ear. "Sorry. I've never met him."

The other women continued speaking to each other, but their voices were very quiet. Balsa felt eyes on her and squirmed. They'd been joking and lighthearted before, but the situation had become serious all of a sudden. Balsa didn't know why. They were looking at her as if she'd

done something to attract their attention, which made her hackles go up.

The woman who'd called out to Balsa before addressed her again. "Sorry to bother you! Don't mind us. We don't mean to be weird, honest."

"It's fine," Balsa called back. "I don't know too many people here yet."

The woman bowed to her politely, wiped her wet hands on her apron, and went back to work. The other women followed her back inside shortly after. Balsa was left alone near the well, working as the evening shadows lengthened and smoke belched out the kitchen chimneys into the darkening sky.



"Are you all right?" a girl sleeping next to Balsa whispered, bringing her to full wakefulness.

Balsa opened her eyes, feeling a little dizzy. She was sweating--was she feverish? But, no. It was just another nightmare.

"You cried out," the girl said.

"Ah," Balsa said, wiping the sweat from her forehead. She pushed her damp hair back from her face and said, "Sorry I woke you. I get bad dreams sometimes."

The workers in this restaurant all slept communally in an attic room with a low ceiling. Their bedrolls were so close together that the heat

was cloying; Balsa had some trouble getting to sleep. Only her exhaustion after the hard day's work made sleeping possible.

The girl who'd wakened her closed her eyes again and turned away from Balsa. Balsa stayed awake for a while, listening to the soft snores and heavy breathing of the women around her.

There was a small window with a frame made of iron near the point where the roof tapered on the ceiling. Balsa shifted to look out the window and watched the quality of the light change as the sun started rising.

Another nightmare. Balsa held herself still and quiet, but internally, she was terrified.

"Oh, a Kanbalese child! Whose clan do you belong to, girl?" The man who spoke had a kind voice and large, warm hands. Those hands stopped her still, though they didn't hurt. "I have a daughter about your age."

The man had a spear, though he wasn't carrying it: it was near the door of the tavern, gleaming dully in the light of a low fire. The spear had intricate carvings and metal decorations all along the shaft. No one but a highly decorated warrior would carry a spear like that.

He doesn't know who I am, Balsa thought to steady herself. But the man reminded her of Jiguro. He was definitely a Kanbalese warrior, and probably one of the King's Spears. Jiguro would come back to the tavern soon, and then he and the man would fight. The man would die, and Jiguro might be injured. He might be killed.

If the man was telling the truth about having a daughter, he might never see her again.

The man patted her gently on the head. She didn't want Jiguro to fight him. She ducked, then ran out of the tavern.

The sight that greeted her outside was the reason for her nightmare. The yard was crowded with warriors--and bodies. Jiguro stood in the thick of it, fighting. Balsa froze, but there was nowhere for her to run. All of these men were here to kill her.

There was a sharp sudden pain in Balsa's right leg, and she was back on the battlefield, surrounded by bandits with an arrow in her thigh. She couldn't move. She saw the bandits moving in with their swords drawn and knew that she had to run, but her legs wouldn't obey her.

That was when she'd finally woken up back in the attic room. She frowned. There was still some time before dawn, but she was certain that she wasn't going to get any more sleep tonight, so she got up, gathered her clothes and her spear, and left the room.

Balsa went downstairs. No one else was up yet, so she decided to go to the well outside for some water. The dew on her feet was icy cold. There were still stars visible in the sky above her head. She sat down near the well and focused on relaxing her limbs and taking deep, calming breaths. She clasped her spear above her in a protective pose and waited for the fear she felt to subside.

When her hands were steady, Balsa stood up and practiced with her spear with strong strikes, letting her emotions eke out of her as she moved. She kept practicing long after going through all the forms she knew, simply moving, remembering the enemies in her dreams and striking them down as if they were in front of her.

At dawn, Balsa leaned her spear against the side of the well and paused to take a drink. Then she loosened her collar, pushed her top down and dunked her entire head in a full bucket of water. The shock of the cold water focused her thoughts, making her feel much better. She re-dressed herself without worrying that her clothing would get wet.

A flock of birds passed over the restaurant, chirping sleepily. Balsa looked up at them and was briefly overcome with the desire to fly away, anywhere but here. If she couldn't fly, she could walk, at least, with the wind at her back. That sounded good, too. She wanted to walk all the way to the border of her homeland, where the mountain passes were... and maybe beyond.

Balsa felt this way after nightmares, sometimes, when she and Jiguro were staying put for a while. She wondered if she should go see him now. She wanted to be on the move. They could quit their jobs here, join up with another caravan and head for Kanbal. Why not?

One of Jiguro's favorite bookstores was in town. He might not want to leave yet. And he was working Toi's Tavern, which was a well-paying job for a respectable establishment. It was autumn, and they wouldn't be able to find a place as good as this one to stay over winter even if they left immediately.

Balsa knew that Jiguro hadn't chosen this place for her recovery out of necessity; there were other places along the river where they could have stopped. He'd chosen this place because it would be safe and comfortable for them for a while, and she couldn't ask him to leave at the end of the season for purely selfish reasons. She gripped her spear in both hands and went back inside the restaurant.



Two weeks later, Balsa was more or less acclimated to her new job. She understood the ins and outs of things and started recognizing regular customers, so it was surprising to her when she started seeing a lot of new faces in the restaurant. They were mostly merchants there to sell or purchase taika flowers.

Taika flowers grew in the forested region of northern Rota at the end of summer and early autumn, and were prized for their high nutritional value and ability to be stored for long periods of time. All the new merchants Balsa met were from southern Rota. They didn't know the methods for harvesting the flowers, which usually grew deep in the woods, so they traveled to places like this where they could buy taika flowers and ship them to the south. Herbalists that knew how to harvest taika flowers also passed through town to resupply and rest.

The influx of people made all the taverns, restaurants and inns unusually busy, and Balsa's was no exception. Sometimes fistfights broke out in the evenings, but the owner of the restaurant never asked Balsa to intervene or act as a guard. She was disappointed, but she had to follow the owner's commands, even if those commands made no sense.

Overall, Balsa didn't mind the man who ran the restaurant. He seemed decent, especially considering his steady clientele of gamblers and bandits. He was well-respected, too; whenever anyone caused a scene or broke something, that person would pay him to cover the damages and apologize for the trouble. He distributed all the extra

money to the workers. Balsa saw many waitresses with new jewelry or hairpins bought with that money, but she squirreled all of her pay into her money pouch and kept it there.

Balsa was different from the other women who worked in the restaurant in both life experience and qualifications. They'd never had to lift anything heavy or deep-clean anything in their lives, so Balsa wound up with the dirtiest jobs simply because she knew how to do them. She didn't really like that, but she didn't complain, either. The work had to be done, and she was getting paid.

One night, it was crowded like usual, and the waitresses waiting to pick up orders in the back of the restaurant started chatting about the likelihood of receiving extra pay from the restaurant owner again. When the place was this packed, it was more common for someone to break something than not, so they liked their odds.

"How many people d'you think are out there? I've lost count," one woman said.

Another woman slid around her, carrying freshly washed and dried dishes. "No idea, but it's definitely more than last night!" she said with a little laugh.

The other dishwashers tittered behind Balsa, whispering and giggling. Their good mood was infectious; Balsa left the kitchen and went out to start taking orders with a spring in her step. She wove through the crowd, carrying trays of fried chicken and rice to many tables.

A gambling competition caught Balsa's eye. She surveyed the gambling table with interest. Her heart skipped a beat when she

recognized one of the gamblers. He was a caravan guard--like her and Jiguro--and he'd turned tail and run at the start of the bandit attack that had left her wounded. He was a traitor and a coward, and he was looking at her wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

He hadn't been expecting her and Jiguro to survive.

Balsa's rage flashed on before she had time to get a handle on it. All the blood went to her head. She wanted to strike him down, right here, right now, but this was her place of employment and she couldn't make a scene. If she did, she'd never be able to work in this town again. She willed herself still, tamping down her anger as her pulse pounded in her ears.

Lurching into motion, Balsa glided around customers and tables until she was standing right next to the caravan guard. He stood up and tried to leave, but his friends at the gambling table said something teasing and he sat back down. He offered Balsa his most winning smile.

The other gamblers noticed Balsa standing there and staring and asked her who she was. She remained silent, staring at the caravan guard with contempt in her eyes.

"Is she a friend of yours?" a gambler asked. "D'you owe her money or somethin'?"

"Don't tell me you're in trouble again, Noran."

Noran waved away his companions' cajoling questions. "I didn't do nothin'. She's some kid who traveled in a caravan with me and other guards once, that's all." He looked up at her. Her expression didn't shift. "Give us a minute."

Noran stood up and walked to a corner of the restaurant where there were fewer people. Balsa followed him with measured steps. There was an empty table nearby with three chairs. Noran gestured for Balsa to sit; he pulled up another chair and sat across from her.

But Balsa didn't sit down. She remained standing on one side of the table.

"I'm surprised you survived," Noran said. "That was a terrible battle."

"You're only surprised because you're the one who lured us into that trap," Balsa spat. "Then you turned tail and fled like a fucking coward."

Noran blinked in surprise. "You shouldn't believe the worst of people, girl. I had nothing to do with bringing the bandits down on us. There were two groups of bandits, so me and another guard went to attack that group from the rear. That's why I ran."

"Liar," Balsa said. "You were in front of me in the caravan line, and you ran ahead, not behind. There weren't two groups of bandits. I know that because we fought them to a man, without your help. Don't take me for some idiot child."

Noran gaped at her fishmouthed, at a loss for words.

"I remember you," Balsa said. "You were acting strangely for a few days before the attack. At the time, I didn't think much of it, but I've had time to think about it since then. I saw you move behind us when we were passing by some rocky cliffs--good cover for bandits. You were signaling them there, weren't you?"

A hard light glinted in Noran's eyes. "That's enough, girl. I think we understand each other. But if we settle this here, we'll trash the place."

Balsa freed her peeling knife from her belt and put it to Noran's ear before he could blink. "We're leaving," she said. "Get up. I don't want to cause this place any trouble, but I'm not letting you out of my sight until our business is done."

Noran laughed. He didn't seem to be afraid of the knife at all. "Are you sure we can't just talk this out?" He stood up, nonchalant, and called out to his gambling friends: "Hey! Sorry to keep y'all waiting. Let's play another game."

His friends called back an acknowledgement. They were so involved in their competition that they hadn't noticed Balsa threaten Noran. The guards in the restaurant hadn't noticed, either, because it was so crowded... but they would notice if it turned into a fight.

Balsa set her knife down on an empty plate in her hand, disgusted. "Watch your back when you leave," she muttered. Then she spun on her heel and returned to the kitchen.



At the end of her shift, Balsa was climbing the stairs to the attic room where the waitresses slept when one of the restaurant's guards, Yan, called out to her.

"What is it?" Balsa asked.

"This came for you," he said, passing Balsa a message. The seal on the message was broken already, meaning that someone else had already read it. There was alcohol on Yan's breath and he was slurring his

words slightly. It must be the end of his shift. A lot of guards drank after hours, though Jiguro never did.

"Who's it from?"

"No idea. A messenger from Toi's Tavern delivered it a while ago."

Balsa took the letter upstairs and read it in the light of a candle. The letters were legible, but they were written in haste.

Something terrible has happened. Come to Tarasu's mooring at the harbor the instant you read this.

Jiguro

Balsa snorted laughter. This was obviously a trap. The handwriting wasn't like Jiguro's at all. If this was the best Noran could come up with, she was disappointed. The diction was all wrong, too. Jiguro was an educated man, and when he wrote, his writing reflected his education. Not even haste and terror would distort his letters so much.

Her anger at Noran still burned high, and now she was even madder because he was underestimating her so much. He thought she was some helpless little girl who couldn't hurt him in any way, and he was dead wrong. She crumpled the message in her fist, then went into the room where the other girls were getting their pajamas on. She grabbed her spear and left without so much as a second glance. She barely heard their idle gossip as she raced down the stairs.

chapter three

being fifteen



Tarasu's mooring was on the Houra River, close to Toi's Tavern where Jiguro was working. The main road through town led right to it, so Balsa made excellent time. During the day this road would be crowded, but with the taverns and restaurants closed, this place was deserted.

Torches lined the street, so the road itself was easy to see. Once she wandered off it, though, the torches would be a hindrance and not a help. It was harder to see in the dark close to the road because of the torchlight. Balsa ran, listening to the torches spit and sputter and watching her own shadow move out of the corner of her eye.

Balsa left the road, seeking cover in some roadside trees. The wind was incredibly strong tonight. There were a few houses in this part of town and the wind whistled through the eaves, making walls rattle and shake. Balsa was alarmed by the noise and peeked through the leaves that concealed her to find out what was happening.

In the distance, Balsa caught sight of a wooden hoist the same height as a small tower. It was used to help haul up cargo from the docks. Using the hoist, a crew could lift heavier barrels and crates safely. This

particular machine was rigged in such a way that horses could be lashed to it, increasing the amount of weight that could be lifted. She remembered seeing the hoist in operation during the day.

There were no horses or crewmen around the hoist now, though she sniffed the lingering smell of horses. Noran man stood still in the shadow of the hoist, alone. The light of the torches from the street reached him, so Balsa could see him clearly. He stood with his arms folded, tapping his foot in impatience.

Balsa approached Noran swiftly, alert to dangers in her surroundings. The wind was a major distraction; she couldn't hear anything well enough to judge if there were more potential attackers or not. The sails of ships flapped in the gale, and the ships themselves and the cargo on board presented bewildering obstacles to her in the semi-darkness, as well as places for enemies to hide. She wasn't terribly familiar with this place even in the daytime, and the darkness made it even more dangerous.

As Balsa traversed the hazardous environment, the thought occurred to her that Noran had been attempting to goad her into a prideful rage so that she would come to him alone. In which case, he might not have underestimated her at all.

Noran's expression was monstrous. He'd been putting on a friendly act at the restaurant and in the caravan, but the look of hatred she saw on his face as she drew near made him look like a demon.

Balsa eased herself over a large pile of sandy ballast and landed silently on the other side of it. There was gravel here--likely used as

ballast as well--so she picked up two small stones and tucked them into her breast pocket.

Noran saw her coming for him and grinned from ear to ear. "So you did come alone. You're braver than I thought you were."

Three men melted out of the shadows near Noran. All of them held the leashes of enormous dogs. Balsa took an involuntary step back, trying to map an escape route. There was so much cargo in the way, and one false step would send her overboard into the river.

This was a dogfight. They were planning to sic the dogs on her so that there wouldn't be any evidence of her being murdered by a weapon. The dogs were so large that the men struggled to control them.

Another man appeared behind Balsa--a veritable giant holding a thick staff in both hands.

"Such a shame," Noran said. "The harbormaster'll get here tomorrow and see you splattered all over the place. Let's hope he gets the place cleaned up before everyone else sees, yeah?" He shook his head in mock pity. "Jiguro can't get any revenge for his daughter's death if it was caused by wild dogs... it's a terrible tragedy."

Noran was trying to goad her into focusing on him, but Balsa didn't. She needed every bit of concentration and focus that she had to spare if she was going to survive this. Noran was an irritating distraction, and she ignored him.

The wild dogs were her primary concern. In some ways, they were more terrifying than human opponents because their pack instincts would make them hunt her as a group. And if she managed to fell them

all without getting injured herself--which was extremely unlikely--there would still be Noran and the four men to deal with.

"Oi, Noran," the giant holding the staff said. "You asked us to bring the dogs out to fight just this one girl? Doesn't seem sporting to me." His speech was slow and slurred from drink.

Some of the other men laughed. "Yeah. Seems like kind of a waste."

Noran alone appeared deadly serious. "Sir, take a look at that girl's weapon, and you'll understand."

While they were talking, Balsa took another step backwards. The giant was behind her, but he was only one enemy, and he was drunk. He tried to catch her, but he was clumsy and fell over; while he was falling, Balsa took a running leap at the nearest dog, which was still on a leash. She used her momentum to stab it through the throat with her short spear.

Instead of removing her weapon from the dying dog, she kept pushing her spear forward into the dog's handler, piercing him deeply in the side. He screamed in pain. She kicked him down and pulled her spear free.

That was the best Balsa could do with a surprise attack. She was surrounded now. A whoosh cut through the air: Balsa ducked just in time to avoid being whacked in the head by the giant's staff. He moved much faster than his bulk would suggest.

There were too many enemies: too many blades to dodge. When the giant attacked her again, she couldn't get out of the way in time, and she received a glancing blow to her side.

Even though the giant hadn't hit Balsa head-on, the strike sent a shock through her entire body. She stumbled backward, coughing and gripping her knees. Her spear was still sheathed in its stone cover, but she felt some reassurance in that she'd managed to keep her grip on it. She swung at the giant's hand with her sheathed spear at the same time as he brought down his staff over her head, and the scabbard impacted the fingers gripping his weapon with all the force of her weight behind it.

The giant howled in pain and loosened his grip on the staff.

"Release the dogs!"

Balsa heard the men shouting to one another, but she didn't pause to listen to what they were saying. The sound of the dogs tearing up the distance between them and her was much more urgent. She had no chance on the ground; she needed distance. Or high ground...

Balsa swept men out of her way with her spear, then grabbed the hoist and started climbing up it as fast as she could. It was slow going-- Balsa wasn't used to climbing one-handed, and a pull in her side from when the giant had attacked her told her that at least one rib was broken. Moving at all was painful, but she kept climbing up with her right hand and her legs while keeping a firm grip on her spear with her left hand.

She was fast, but the dogs were faster. One of them leaped at her, bit into her leg with its teeth and pulled her down the hoist. She twisted and brought the butt of her spear down on the dog's body, making it let go. Warm blood gushed down to her ankle. She kept climbing until she was out of reach.

“Hey there!” Noran waved at her from below. “You’re smarter than you look. D’you plan to stay up there all day and all night like a cicada clinging to a tree?” Then he turned to his companions. “Use the stones from the ballast to bring that insect down!”

The men dug around in the same rocky area that Balsa had discovered earlier and came up with a few large stones to throw.

Balsa hoped for more time so she could catch her breath and think, but there wasn’t any more time. “Noran!” she called out.

Noran looked up at her. She grabbed one of the stones she’d picked up out of her breast pocket and hurled it at his head. Her aim was true: the stone struck him directly between the eyes. His eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed, unconscious.

He was down. Balsa seized the rope from the top of the hoist in one hand and kicked off of it, jumping down using the rope so that she wouldn’t hurt herself further. The rope was very long and sturdy to support heavy cargo, so it supported Balsa’s weight easily. She’d climbed up high enough that she could jump into the river, so that was exactly what she did, landing in the water with a terrific splash.

Agonizing pain shot through her left shoulder and side as she swam. She felt like she’d been beaten black and blue. She sank down to the sandy bottom of the river, struggling to surface. Her limbs felt heavy. The shock of the cold water and the worsening pain of her injuries made her vision hazy.

Balsa’s left hand lashed out at something and held: she could tell by touch that it was a buoy, a rubbery floating block lashed between the

harbor's boats and the dock. She pulled herself up on the buoy, then got her hands around the rope tying it to the dock.

That was when her good luck ran out. She could see the shore from here, but the current of the Houra River was strong, and the river itself was very deep. She'd be able to make it if she was uninjured, but as things were, she would have to keep hold of the rope. If she did that, the current would pull her down, and she would drown.

Balsa's only hope now was to find a boat to climb up into. The water was too cold at this time of year for her to stay in it for very long. She saw one in the middle distance; she could get to it if she followed the buoy's rope. She swam slowly in fits and starts, stopping whenever her broken rib made her want to scream. Her hands shook on the rope. She used the last of her strength to seize the side of a small boat and pitch herself forward onto it, not caring even if she hurt herself further.

She lay down on the boat, feeling a little better, but she couldn't let herself relax. More attackers were still nearby. She had to assume that they'd seen her climb into the boat. Much though she wanted to do something to hide, that was impossible. There was nothing to do now but wait.

Wind over the water carried the sound of men's voices to Balsa's ears.

"Is Noran really worth all this fuss? Why not just let the girl alone?" one grumbled.

Another--Balsa recognized his voice as the giant's--laughed. "Noran's never been worth any fuss at all. He's rotten to the core. You new around here or somethin'?" He chuckled. "Anyway, go see if he's dead,

will you? If he's still alive, haul him back. If not, come back and search with me."

"Got it."

Balsa listened intently as men's footsteps drew ever closer. She could hear their dogs, too, walking and panting. Her hands wouldn't stop shaking. She couldn't just stay here completely exposed, so she willed strength into her legs and stumbled up onto the deck, then rolled.

There was no one on the boat at the moment; the sailors must be staying in town for the night. The sail flapped in the high wind, and the rigging jingled and clanged where it wasn't fully secure. She couldn't hear the dogs anymore.

Balsa curled up small on the deck like a pill bug with her arms wrapped tightly around herself and tried to get her breathing under control. She was soaked through and felt like she was freezing to death. Every inhalation made her whole body ache, but she had to stay still and quiet.

The sky above was clear and cloudless. The stars shone like pieces of ice. She could see the wind kicking up dust and dirt and carrying it across the sky. She remembered Tanda telling her once, a long time ago, that the wind was what swept the sky clean.

Balsa started to cry. The tears on her cheeks felt warm.

It was her own fault that she was in this situation: chased by low-life churls, severely injured, freezing, and now crying: a drowned rat had more dignity.

Balsa stayed curled around herself and cried for a long time.



When Balsa returned to awareness, she was still cold. She'd either slipped into unconsciousness or fallen asleep. She was glad that Noran's friends hadn't found her, but she had no idea how she was going to get back to Toi's Tavern where Jiguro worked.

Balsa opened her eyes and looked around. She wasn't on the boat anymore, but inside a dark room. She saw a desk near a single window. There was a scroll open on the desk. Jiguro was reading it in the light of a candle.

This was Jiguro's room at the tavern.

Jiguro worked nights, which meant that he couldn't go to sleep until everyone else was done working for the day. When she was little, Balsa didn't understand why he always had to stay up so late. Since all the customers were gone, there wouldn't be any drunken brawls or anything. Jiguro had laughed and explained to her the many hazards in a store or restaurant at night: thieves, bandits, professional rivals. He was expected to protect the places where he worked from those dangers. That was one reason why he didn't drink.

Because Jiguro was like that--alert to every threat--his employers trusted him, and his reputation spread. He was paid better than most guards even though he hadn't been in the profession as long as most of them.

Balsa looked at the faint light streaming in from the window and sat up. She could stand, though it was difficult. She thought for a few

moments about what she wanted to say, then called out to Jiguro in a voice made weak and quiet by her injured side.

“Hm?” Jiguro turned a little toward her, but his face was in shadow, so she couldn’t see his expression. “What happened?” His question was neutral. He sounded calm, not angry or overly concerned.

“I did something pretty stupid,” Balsa said. “Noran came to the restaurant when I was there. I figured out that he sold us out to the bandits, and I couldn’t let it go...” Gritting her teeth, Balsa told Jiguro the whole story of how she’d come to be hiding on a boat tied up along the river.

When she was done speaking, Balsa hung her head and said, “I’ll leave town. I can’t possibly stay now. You might not see me for awhile, but don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

Jiguro didn’t say anything. Then he set aside his scroll with a little laugh. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll leave the back way open for you, so you can stay here until you’re recovered.” He got up and left the room, vanishing into the predawn gloom. Balsa followed him outside, then decided to leave the tavern.

Balsa wasn’t joking when she’d told him that she wanted to be on her own. She was glad Jiguro had saved her, but she wasn’t expecting him to do that: not again. He’d already saved her more than enough times. She reached the outer doors and got herself mentally prepared to run. She wouldn’t start feeling better until she’d put this place behind her.

Running proved impossible: she was still too hurt. Someone seized her collar from behind as she tripped over her own feet and fell forward, and she passed out.



When Balsa returned to consciousness again, there was a blanket over her shoulders and a fire crackling next to her. Balsa turned to her uninjured side so that she could sit up without too much pain. There was a lot of firewood stacked near the door of the room, but Jiguro was absent. The wind picked up, making the fire pop and splutter when it forced its way through the cracks in the wooden building.

There was a book left open on a chair in easy reach. On the table, Balsa saw unshelled walnuts and a knife. Her eyes had just alighted on the walnuts when she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Jiguro came into the room, carrying two large mugs of steaming tea.

Jiguro passed one of the tea mugs to Balsa. She sipped it carefully, since it was too hot to just gulp down.

"I've been asking around," Jiguro said, setting his own mug of tea down on the table. "Seems like Noran's been passing himself off as a messenger or a guard, then sending false information or luring caravans into traps. He's been clever about it; he never stays in one area of Rota for long, and he spaces out his schemes so that he has time to make an escape."

Balsa didn't look up. She kept her eyes on her tea.

"That said, you made a scene at Furahan's, and some of the other waiters noticed. I think it's best for us to leave town for a bit, until the rumors die down. By good luck, I met a caravan leader desperate for guards when I went out this morning. We can leave this afternoon."

Balsa frowned. "Stop it."

"What?"

Balsa looked Jiguro in the eyes and said, "Stop it. Just... you take care of yourself, and I'll take care of myself. I never asked you to take care of me or get us away from here." Balsa tried to say all this calmly, but she was almost crying by the end of it.

Jiguro considered her for a moment. "I see. And how do you plan to take care of yourself, then?"

"I'll find work at another place, in this town or the next one," Balsa said. "I'll manage."

"With no one to refer you and no reputation to rely on, except these rumors?" Jiguro raised an eyebrow.

Balsa's shoulders sank. It was true that Furahan's Restaurant wouldn't give her a reference. It would be difficult to find any work, never mind work that paid decently well, as an unknown wanderer just passing through.

"You can't get a job without a reference," Jiguro said quietly.

"I know that!" Balsa snapped. "I'll figure it out!" Her eyelids overflowed with tears.

Jiguro rested his hand lightly on top of her head. His other hand followed it, resting on top. Balsa closed her eyes.

"Being fifteen means seeing the world as warped, like a crooked arrow pulled into the groove of a bow. Even if the eyes could see

properly, the arrow would never hit the target. But turning twenty grants good sight to those who make it that far.”

The words sounded a little like a poem.

“Being fifteen is like walking through a dark wood, all alone and lost. It takes five years to find the way clearly. It seems like such a long time...”

Jiguro removed his hands from Balsa’s head.

“Who wrote that poem?” she asked.

Jiguro laughed. “Rolua. The one you said would put you to sleep. In addition to being a poet, he was skilled at making bows and arrows.”

Balsa opened her eyes and saw Jiguro smiling down at her.

“You think you owe me a debt,” Jiguro said. “You don’t. Get that ridiculous idea out of your head.”

Jiguro went to the table, cracked open a walnut with the knife, and passed Balsa half the unshelled nut.

Balsa looked down at the walnut piece without eating it. Her tears fell on her palm and made it shine. She lifted it up to remove a few bits of lingering shell and felt a sharp pain run down her side.

Her rib was broken. She wouldn’t be able to run or do any difficult work until it was healed. She could try to work through the pain, but that would increase the time it would take for her to be well again.

Jiguro noticed her expression and posture. “The left rib, huh? You’ve always been a little weaker with your left side. It’s a common issue with

warriors.” He sat at the table and cracked open more walnuts, always giving Balsa half.

“The caravan we’re leaving with is going to Jitan, but our contract ends at Toluan,” Jiguro said.

Balsa blinked and looked over at him. “Why?”

“I’m planning to spend the next year or so in New Yogo,” he said. “Torogai will always take us in, and it’s a safe place for you to recover and train.”

Torogai’s house in the mountains... it would be lush and green still, at this time of year. They could huddle around a fire outside and look at the stars.

“Tanda will be glad to see you again,” Jiguro said. And he smiled.

epilogue

the hawk in flight



The room was getting lighter. Balsa stayed lost in memories, thinking of Jiguro.

Were you happy that you saved me? Did you want to raise me? Didn't you suffer?

She remembered feeling his hands resting gently on her head and his soft voice as he tried to explain himself to her and wondered, Was I ever so soft with Chagum? Does he know how much I care?

Chagum was leaving with the Kanbalese cavalry tomorrow morning. New Yogo was going to war. Balsa might never see his face again.

She wanted to find him and tell him everything, but she held herself still. He needed rest, and he was busy. She wondered if he was haunted by the things that had happened to him in his past.

Balsa closed her eyes and breathed deeply. It was true that she'd seen herself and the world more clearly at the age of twenty than at fifteen, but now that she was past thirty, there were so many things she didn't understand. The world beyond her own experience was *terra incognita*: just as undefined and hazy as the world her younger self had lived in.

“Being fifteen is like walking through a dark wood, all alone and lost. It takes five years to find the way clearly. It seems like such a long time...” She remembered Jiguro’s voice, as clearly as if he was in the room with her.

The cry of a hawk pierced the early morning stillness. She could see it flying in lazy circles through her window. She kept watching it fly until she fell back to sleep.

This is the end of *Those Who Walk the Flame Road*.

There is another other side-story in the *Guardian of the Spirit* series, *Where the Wind Takes Us*.

afterword

tributaries



Now that *Those Who Walk the Flame Road* is finally out, I like a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders. *The Flame Road* is so long, as a story, that it's practically a novel on its own. I thought of it well before *Traveler of the Blue Road*, which took a very long time to write. *The Sacred Tree* (my first novel) was being reprinted and I was doing book tours and interviews. People kept asking me when the next book would be coming out. I thought about the question, and *The Flame Road* is the result of that pondering. It came to me dimly, like the heat haze Hugo sees so often.

As for why I would write this specific story at that time, it's hard to say. Why not *Traveler of the Blue Road* first? I think that this story had to be written first, before I could even attempt *Traveler of the Blue Road*. I didn't know who Hugo Arayutan was before I wrote it, or why his nation was destroyed by Talsh, or the reasons why his family were massacred. Through Hugo, I came to understand the southern continent and Talsh.

I was also interested in Yogo, specifically in how it differed from New Yogo after a cultural separation of two centuries. Chagum gets to see Hoshiro in the distance in *Traveler of the Blue Road*, but he never gets to

walk the streets there; he doesn't know Yogo the same way Hugo does. I was eager to explore it myself.

I think that part of the reason I found forward progress on *Traveler of the Blue Road* so difficult was that I came to understand Hugo, his captor and eventual ambivalent ally, more than I understood what Chagum was thinking and feeling. After I finished *The Flame Road*, returning to Chagum's perspective was much easier.

However, I knew from the outset that the characters from previous books in the series that people love--people like Balsa and Chagum--wouldn't be able to make an appearance in this story. And I do consider that an unfortunate lack. All I can say is that Hugo's story had a bearing on the series' past, and on how things end up in *Guardian of Heaven and Earth*. I like Hugo a lot, and I hope that others will, too.

I didn't write the story when I was on my book tour, but a few days after I came home, I began work on it, and it flowed out very naturally. I can never say for certain what causes an idea to form and work well and what doesn't; the mind is a mysterious thing. I didn't want to publish a novella with so little basis in previous stories, so when a story of Balsa's adolescence presented itself--one with many parallels to Hugo's--I finally understood the structure of this particular book.

I wasn't expecting Hugo and Balsa to have so many things in common. Adolescence is a turbulent time for most people, though, so perhaps it shouldn't have been a surprise.

Both of these stories take place before the final volume of *Guardian of Heaven and Earth*. I sincerely hope they are enjoyable!

Uehashi Nahoko

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Abiko